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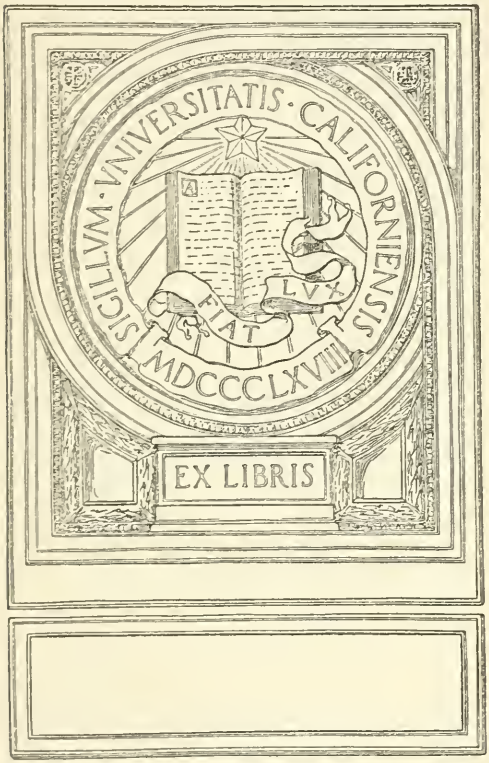

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"Two of the police had now arrived." (*Page* 295)

M or N.] [*Frontispiece.*

M. or N.

"Similia similibus curantur"

By

G. J. Whyte-Melville

Author of "Market Harborough," "Katerfelto," "Cerise," "Satanella," etc.

Illustrated by Adolf Thiede

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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	"Small and Early"	7
II.	"Nightfall"	17
III.	Tom Ryfe	26
IV.	Gentleman Jim	35
V.	The Cracksman's Checkmate	44
VI.	A Reversionary Interest	53
VII.	Dick Stanmore	63
VIII.	Nina	75
IX.	The Usual Difficulty	83
X.	The Fairy Queen	92
XI.	In the Scales	103
XII.	"A Cruel Parting"	110
XIII.	Sixes and Sevens	119
XIV.	The Officers' Mess	132
XV.	Mrs. Stanmore at Home	143
XVI.	"Missing—A Gentleman"	154
XVII.	"Wanted—A Lady"	165
XVIII.	"The Coming Queen"	176
XIX.	An Incubus	186
XX.	"The Little Cloud"	195

280604

CHAP.		PAGE
XXI.	Furens Quid Fœmina	205
XXII.	"Not for Joseph"	215
XXIII.	Anonymous	225
XXIV.	Parted	236
XXV.	Coaxing a Fight	246
XXVI.	Baffled	255
XXVII.	Blinded	266
XXVIII.	Beat	277
XXIX.	Night-Hawks	285
XXX.	Under the Acacias	298

M. or N.

"*Similia similibus curantur*"

CHAPTER I

"SMALL AND EARLY"

A WILD wet night in the Channel, the white waves leaping, lashing, and tumbling together in that confusion of troubled waters, which nautical men call a "cross-sea." A dreary, dismal night on Calais sands: faint moonshine struggling through a low driving scud, the harbour-lights quenched and blurred in mist. Such a night as bids the trim French sentry hug himself in his watch-coat, calmly cursing the weather, while he hums the chorus of a comic opera, driving his thoughts by force of contrast to the lustrous glow of the wine-shop, the sparkling eyes and gold ear-rings of Mademoiselle Thérèse, who presides over Love and Bacchus therein. Such a night as gives the travellers in the mail-packet some notion of those ups and downs in life which landsmen may bless themselves to ignore, as hints to the Queen's Messenger, seasoned though he be, that ten minutes more of that heaving, pitching, tremulous motion would lay him alongside those poor sick neophytes whom he pities and condemns; reminding him how even *he* has cause to be thankful when he reflects that, save for an occasional Levanter, the Mediterranean is a mill-pond compared to La Manche. Such a night as makes the hardy fisherman running for Havre or St.

Valérie growl his "Babord" and "Tribord" in harsher tones than usual to his mate, because he cannot keep his thoughts off Marie and the little ones ashore; his dark-eyed Marie, praying her heart out to the Virgin on her knees, feeling, as the fierce wind howls and blusters round their hut, that not on her wedding-morning, not on that summer eve when he won her down by the sea, did she love her Pierre so dearly, as now in this dark boisterous weather, that causes her very flesh to creep while she listens to its roar. Nobody who could help it would be abroad on Calais sands. "Pas même un Anglais!" mutters the sentry, ordering his firelock with a ring, and wishing it was time for the Relief. But an Englishman *is* out nevertheless, wandering aimlessly to and fro on the beach; turning his face to windward against the driving rain; trying to think the wet on his cheek is all from *without;* vainly hoping to stifle grief, remorse, anxiety, by exposure and active bodily exercise.

"How could I stay in that cursed room?" he mutters, striding wildly among the sand-hills. "The very tick of the clock was enough to drive one mad in those long fearful pauses—solemn and silent as death! Can't the fools do anything for her? What is the use of nurses and doctors, and all the humbug of medicine and science? My darling! my darling! It was too cruel to hear you wailing and crying, and to know I could do you no good! What a coward I am to have fled into the wilderness like a murderer! I couldn't have stayed there, I feel I couldn't! I wish I hadn't listened at the door! Only yesterday you seemed so well and in such good spirits, with your dark eyes looking so patiently and fondly into mine! And now, if she should die!—if she should die!"

Then he stands stock-still, turning instinctively from the wind like one of the brutes, while the past comes back in a waking dream so akin to reality, that even in his pre-occupation he seems to live the last year of his life over again. Once more he is at the old place in Cheshire, whither he has gone like any other young dandy, an agreeable addition to a country shooting-party because of his chestnut locks, his blue eyes, his handsome person, and general recklessness of character; agreeable, he reflects,

to elderly *roués* and established married women, but a scarecrow to mothers, and a stumbling-block to daughters, as being utterly penniless and rather good-for-nothing. Once more he comes down late for dinner, to find a vacant place by that beautiful girl, with her delicate features, her wealth of raven hair, above all, with the soft, sad, dreamy eyes, that look so loving, so trustful, and so good. In such characters as theirs these things are soon accomplished. A walk or two, a waltz, a skein of silk to wind, a drive in a pony-carriage, an afternoon church, and behold them in the memorable summer-house, where he won her heart—completely and unreservedly, while flinging down his own! Then came all the sweet excitement, all the fascinating mystery of mutual understanding, of stolen glances, of hidden meanings in the common phrases and daily courtesies of social life. It was so delightful for each to feel that other existence bound up in its own, to look down from their enchanted mountain, with pity not devoid of contempt on the commonplace dwellers on the plain, undeterred by proofs more numerous perhaps on the hills of Paphos than in any other airy region, that

"Great clymbers fall unsoft;"

to know that come sorrow, suffering, disgrace, or misfortune, there was refuge and safety for the poor, broken-winged bird, though its plumage were torn by the fowler's cruelty, or even soiled in the storm of shame. Alas! that the latter should arrive too soon!

Perhaps of this young couple, the girl, in her perfect faith and entire self-sacrifice, may have been less aghast than her lover at the imminence of discovery, reprobation, and scorn. When no other course was left open, she eloped willingly enough with the man she had trusted—shutting her eyes to consequences, in that recklessness of devotion which, lead though it may to much unhappiness in life, constitutes not the least lovable trait of the female character, so ready to burst into extremes of right and wrong.

Besides, who cares for consequences at nineteen, with the sun glinting on the waves of the Channel, the sea-air

freshening cheek and brow, the coast of Picardy rising bright and glistening, in smiles of welcome, and the dear, fond face looking down so proudly and wistfully on its treasure? Consequences indeed! They have been left with the heavy baggage at London Bridge, to reach their proper owner possibly hereafter in Paris; but meantime, with this fresh breeze blowing—on the blue sea—under the blue sky—they do not exist—there are no such things!

These young people were very foolish, very wicked, but they loved each other very dearly. Mr. Bruce was none of those heartless, unscrupulous Lovelaces, oftener met with in fiction than in real life, who can forget they are *men* as well as gentlemen; and when he crossed the Channel with Miss Algernon, it was from sheer want of forethought, from mismanagement, no doubt, but still more from misfortune, that she was Miss Algernon still.

To marry, was to be disinherited—that he knew well enough; but neither he nor his Nina, as he called her, would have paused for this consideration. There were other difficulties, trivial in appearance, harassing, vexatious, insurmountable in reality, that yet seemed from day to day about to vanish; so they waited, and temporised, and hesitated, till the opportunity came of escaping together, and they availed themselves of it without delay.

Now they had reached French ground, and were free, but it was too late! That was why Mr. Bruce roamed so wildly to-night over the Calais sands, tortured by a cruel fear that he might lose the treasure of his heart for ever; exaggerating, in that supreme moment of anxiety, her sufferings, her danger, perhaps even her priceless value to himself.

To do him justice, he did not think for an instant of the many galling annoyances to which both must be subjected hereafter in the event of her coming safely through her trial. He found no time to reflect on a censorious world, an outraged circle of friends, an infuriated family; on the cold shoulder Mrs. Grundy would turn upon his darling, and the fair mark he would himself be bound to offer that grim old father, who had served under Wellington, or that soft-spoken dandy brother in the Guards, unerring at "rocketers," and deadly for all ground game,

neither of whom would probably shoot the wider, under the circumstances that he, the offender, felt in honour he must stand at least one discharge without retaliation, an arrangement which makes twelve paces uncomfortably close quarters for the passive and immovable target. He scarcely dwelt a moment on the bitter scorn with which his own great-uncle, whose natural heir he was, would calmly and deliberately curse this piece of childish folly, while he disinherited its perpetrator without scruple or remorse. He never even considered the disadvantage under which a life that ought to be very dear to him was now opening on the world: a life that might be blighted through its whole course by his own folly, punished, a score of years hence, for unwittingly arriving a few weeks too soon. No! He could think of nothing but Nina's anguish and Nina's danger; could only wander helplessly backwards and forwards, stupefied by the continuous gusts of that boisterous sea-wind, stunned by the dull wash of the incoming tide, feeling for minutes at a time, a numbed, apathetic impotency; till, roused and stung by a rush of recurring apprehensions, he hastened back to his hotel, white, agitated, dripping wet, moving with wavering gestures and swift, irregular strides, like a man in a trance.

At the foot of the staircase he ran into the arms of a dapper French doctor, young, yet experienced, a man of science, a man of pleasure, an anatomist, a dancer, a philosopher, and a dandy—who put both hands on his shoulders, and looked in his face with so comical an expression of congratulation, sympathy, pity, and amusement, that Mr. Bruce's fears vanished on the instant, and he found voice to ask, in husky accents, "if it was over?"

"Over!" repeated the doctor. "Pardon, my good sir. For our interesting young friend it is only just begun. A young lady, monsieur, a veritable little aristocrat, with a delicate nose, and, my faith, sound and powerful lungs! I make you my compliment, monsieur. I am happy to be the first to advertise you of good news. It is late. Let madame be kept tranquil. You will permit me to wish you good-night. I will return again in the morning."

"And she is safe?" exclaimed Bruce, crushing the doctor's hand in a grasp like a vice.

"Safe!" answered the little man. "Parbleu—yes—for the present, safe as the mole in the harbour, and likely to remain so if you will only keep out of the room. Come, you shall see her for one quiet little moment. She desires it so much. And when I scratch at the door thus, you will come out. Agreed? Enter, then. You shall embrace your child."

So the good-natured man turned into the hotel again, to conduct Mr. Bruce back to the door from which he had fled in anguish an hour or two ago, and was thus five minutes too late for another professional engagement, which could not be postponed, but went on indeed very well without him, the expectant lady being a person of experience, the wife of a Calais fisherman, and now employed for the thirteenth time in her yearly occupation. But this has nothing to do with Mr. Bruce.

That gentleman stole on tiptoe through the darkened room, catching a glimpse, as he passed the tawdry mirror on the chimney-piece, of a very pale and anxious face strangely unlike his own, while from behind the half-drawn bed-curtains he heard a quiet placid breathing, and a weak, faint voice with its tender whisper, "Charlie, are you there? My darling, I begged so hard to see you for one minute, and—Charlie dear, to—to show you *this*."

This was a morsel of something swathed up in wrappings, round which the young mother's arm was folded with proud, protecting love; but I think he had been too anxious about the woman to feel a proper elation in his new position as father to the child. The tears came thick to his eyes once more, while he caught the pale, fragile hand that lay so weary and listless on the counterpane, to press it against his lips, his cheeks, his forehead, murmuring broken words of endearment, and gratitude, and joy.

She would have kept him there all night: she would have talked to him for an hour, feeble as she was, of that little being, in so short a time promoted to its sovereignty of Baby (with a capital B), in which she had already discovered instincts, qualities, high reasoning powers, noble moral characteristics: but the doctor's tap was heard, "scratching," as he called it, at the door, and Bruce, too

happy not to be docile, had the good sense to obey his summons without delay.

"Let them sleep, monsieur," said the Frenchman, struggling into his great-coat, and hurrying down-stairs. "It will do them more good than all your prevision and all my experience. I will return in the morning, to inquire after madame and to renew my acquaintance with mademoiselle—I should say with 'your charming mees.' Monsieur, you are now father of a family—you should keep early hours. Good-night, then—till to-morrow."

Bruce looked after him with a blessing on his lips, and a fervent thanksgiving in his heart to the Providence that had spared him his treasure. For the moment, I believe, he completely forgot that important personage with whom originated all their anxiety and discomfort. To men, indeed, there is so little individuality about a Baby, that, I fear, it has to be weaned and vaccinated, and to go through many other processes before it ceases to be a thing, and rather an inconvenient one. No; Bruce went to his own sitting-room, with his heart so full of his Nina, there was scarcely place for other considerations; therefore, instead of going to bed, he kicked off his wet boots, turned on a brilliant illumination of gas, and threw himself into an arm-chair—to smoke. After the excitement he had lately passed through, the first few whiffs of his cigar were soothing and consolatory in the extreme, but reflection comes with tobacco, not less surely than warmth comes with fire; and soon he began to see the crowd of fresh difficulties which the events of to-night would bring swarming round his devoted head. How he cursed his foolish calculations, his ill-judged caution, his cowardly scruples, thus to have postponed the ceremony of marriage till too late. How impossible it would be now, to throw dust in the eyes of society as to dates and circumstances! how fruitless the reparation which should certainly be put off no longer, no, not a day! It seemed so hard that he, of all the world, should have injured the woman who loved him, the woman whom he so devotedly loved in return. He almost hated the innocent baby for its inopportune arrival; but remembering how that poor little creature too must bear the punishment of his crime, he flung the end of his cigar

against the stove with a curse, and for one moment—only one bitter, painful moment—found himself wishing he had never met, never loved, his darling; had left the lamb at peace in its fold, the rose ungathered on its stalk.

The clock did not tick twice before there came a reaction. It seemed so impossible that they should be independent of each other. He would not be himself without Nina! and the flow of his affection, like the back-water of a mill-stream, returned only the stronger for its momentary interruption. After all, Nina was everything, Nina was the first consideration. Something must be done at once. As soon as she could bear it, that ceremony must be gone through which should have been performed long ago. He was young, he was impatient, he would fain be at work without delay; so he turned to his writing-table, and began opening certain letters that had already followed him into France, but that he had laid aside without examination, in the excitement of the last few hours.

They were not calculated to afford him much distraction. A circular from a coal company, a couple of invitations to dinner, a tailor's bill, and a manifesto from the firm, calling attention to the powers of endurance with which their little account had "made running" for a considerable period, while promising a "lawyer's letter" to enforce payment of the same. Next this hostile protocol lay a business-like missive bearing a Lincoln's Inn look about it not to be mistaken, and which Bruce determined he would leave unopened till the morning, when, if Nina had slept, and was doing well, he felt nothing in the world could make him unhappy.

"Serves me right, though," he yawned, "for deserting Poole. *He* wouldn't have bothered me for a miserable pony at such a time as this;" and flinging off his clothes, in less than five minutes he was as fast asleep as if he had never known an anxiety in the world, but was lulled by the soothing considerations of a well-spent past, an untroubled conscience, and a balance at his banker's!

So he slept and dreamed not, as those sleep who are thoroughly out-wearied in body and mind, waking only when the sun had been up more than an hour, and the stormy night had given place to a clear, unclouded day.

The Channel was all blue and white now; the rollers, as they subsided into a long heaving ground-swell, bringing in with them a freight of health and freshness to the shore. The gulls were soaring and screaming round the harbour, edging their wings with gold as they dipped and wheeled in the morning light. Everything spoke of hope and happiness and vitality. Bruce opened his window, drew in long breaths of the keen, reviving air, and stole to listen at Nina's door.

How his heart went up in gratitude to heaven! Mother and child were sleeping—so peacefully, so soundly. Mother and child! At that early period the dearest, the sweetest, the holiest link of human love—the gold without the dross, the flower without the insect, the wine without the headache, the full fruition of the feelings without the wear and tear of the heart.

He could have kissed the antiquated French chambermaid, dressed like a Sister of Mercy, who met him in the passage, and wishing "Monsieur" good-morning, congratulated him with tears of honest sympathy in her glittering, bold black eyes. He *did* give a five-franc piece to the alert and well-dressed waiter, who looked as if he had never been in bed, and never required to go. It may be this impulse of generosity reminded him that five-franc pieces were likely to be scarce with him in future, and an unpleasant association of ideas brought the lawyer's letter to his mind. There it lay, square and uncompromising, between his watch and his cigar-case. He opened it, I am afraid, with a truly British oath.

He turned quite white when he read it the first time, but the blood rushed to his temples on a second perusal, and he flung himself down on his knees at the window-sill, thanking Providence, somewhat inconsiderately, for the benefits that only came to him through another man's death.

This letter, indeed, though the composition of a lawyer, had not been written at the instance of his long-suffering tailor, but was from the solicitor who conducted the business of his family. It advised him, in very concise language, of his great-uncle's sudden "demise," as it was worded, "intestate"; informing him that he thus became

heir, as next of kin, to the whole personal and real property of the deceased, and concluded with sincere congratulations on his accession to a fine fortune, not without a hope that their firm might continue to manage his affairs, and afford him the same satisfaction that had always been expressed by his late lamented relative, etc.

The surprise staggered him like a blow. From such blows, however, we soon "come to time," willing to take any amount of similar punishment. He gave himself credit for self-denial in not waking Nina on the instant to tell her of their good fortune. Still more, he plumed himself on his forethought in resolving to ask her doctor's leave before he entered on so exciting a topic with the invalid. He longed to tell somebody. He was so happy, so elated, so thankful! and yet, amidst all his joy, there rankled an uncomfortable sensation of remorse and self-reproach when he thought of the little blighted life, the little injured helpless creature nestling to its young mother's side in the next room.

CHAPTER II

"NIGHTFALL"

It is more than twenty years ago, and yet how vividly it all comes back to him to-night!

The sun has gone down in streaks of orange and crimson over the old oaks that crown the deer-park sloping upward to the rear of Ecclesfield Manor. Mr. Bruce walks across a darkened room to throw the window open for a gasp of fresh evening air, laden with the perfume of pinks, carnations, and moss-roses in the garden below. *Her* garden! Is it possible? Something in the action reminds him of that bright, hopeful morning at Calais. Something in the scent of the flowers steals to his brain, half torpid and benumbed; his heart contracts with an agony of physical suffering. "My darling! my darling!" he murmurs, "shall I never see you tying those flowers again?" and turning from the window, he falls on his knees by the bedside with a passionate burst of weeping that, like blood-letting to the body, restores the unwelcome faculty of consciousness to his mind. When he raises his head again he knows well enough that the one great misfortune has arrived at last—that henceforth for *him* there may come, in the lapse of long years, resignation, even repose, but hope and happiness no more.

Even now, though he wonders at his own callousness, he can bear to look on the bed through a mist of tears; and, so looking, feels his intellect failing in its effort to grasp the calamity that has befallen him.

There she lies, like a dead lily, his own, his treasure,

his beloved; the sweet face, calm and placid, with its chiselled ivory features, its smooth and gentle brow, has already borrowed a higher, a more perfect beauty from the immortality on which it has entered. Not fairer, not lovelier did she look that well-remembered evening when he first knew her pure and priceless heart was his own, though she has borne him a daughter—nay, two daughters (and he winces with a fresh and different pain)—the younger as old as she was then. Her raven hair is parted soft and silky off those pale, delicate temples; her long black lashes rest upon the waxen cheek. No; she never looked as beautiful, not in the calm sleep he used to watch so lovingly; and now the deep, fond eyes must open on his own no more. She was so gentle, too, so patient, so sweet-tempered, and O, so true. He had been a man of the world, neither better nor worse than others: he knew women well; knew how rare are the good ones; knew the prize he had won, and valued it—yes, he was sure he always valued it as it deserved. What was the use? Had she not far better have been like the others—petulant, wilful, capricious, covetous of admiration, careless of affection, weak-headed, shallow-hearted, and desirous only of that which could not possibly be her own? Such were most of the women amongst whom he had been thrown in his youth; but O, how unlike her who was lying dead there before his eyes.

> "For men at most differ as heaven and earth,
> But women, worst and best, as heaven and hell."

He felt so keenly now that she had been his better angel for more than twenty years; that but for her he might long ago have deteriorated to selfishness and cynicism, or sunk into that careless philosophy which believes only in the tangible, the material, and the present.

A good woman's lot may be linked to that of a bad man; she may even love him very dearly, and yet retain much of her purer, better nature amidst all the mire in which she is steeped; but it is not so with us. To care for a bad woman is to be dragged down to her level, inch by inch, till the intellect itself becomes sapped in a daily degradation of the heart. From such slavery emancipa-

tion is cheap under any suffering, at any sacrifice. The lopping of a limb is a painful process, but above a gangrened wound experienced surgeons amputate without scruple or remorse.

On the other hand, a true woman's affection is of all earthly influences the noblest and most elevating. It encourages the highest and gentlest qualities of man's nature—his enterprise, courage, patience, sympathy, above all, his trust. Happy the pilgrim on whose life such a beacon-star has shone out to guide him in the right way; thrice happy if it sets not until it has lured him so far that he will never again turn aside from the path.

Such reflections as these, while they added to his sense of loss and loneliness, yet took so much of the sting out of Mr. Bruce's great sorrow, that he could realise it for minutes at a time without being goaded to madness or stunned to apathy by the pain.

There had been no warning—no preparation. He had left her that morning as usual, after smoking a cigar in her society on the lawn, while she tied, and snipped, and gathered the flowers of her pretty garden. He had visited the stable, ordered the pony-carriage, seen the keeper, and been to look at an Alderney cow. It was one of his idle days, yet, after twenty years of marriage, such days he still liked to spend, if possible, in the company of his wife. So he strolled back to write his letters in her boudoir, and entered it at the garden door, expecting to find her, as usual, busied in some graceful feminine employment.

Her work was heaped on the sofa; a book she had been reading lay open on the table; the very flowers she gathered an hour ago had the dew on them still. He could not finish his first letter without consulting her, for she kept his memory, his conscience, and his money, just as she kept his heart, so he ran up-stairs to her bedroom door and knocked.

There was no answer, and he went in. At the first glance he thought she must have fainted, for she had fallen on her knees against a high-backed chair, her face buried in its cushions, and one hand touching the carpet. He had a quick eye, and the turn of that grey rigid hand warned him with a stab of something he refused persist-

ently to believe. Then he lifted her on the bed where she lay now, and sent for every doctor within reach.

He had no recollection of the interval that elapsed before the nearest could arrive, nor distinct notion of any part of that long sunny afternoon while he sat by his Nina in the death-chamber. Once he got up to stop the ticking of a clock on the chimney-piece, moving mechanically with stealthy footfall across the room lest she should be disturbed. The doctors came and went, agreeing, as they left the house, that he had answered their questions with wonderful precision and presence of mind; nay, that he was less prostrated by the blow than they should have expected. "Disease of the heart," said they—I believe they called it "the *pericardium*"; and after paying a tribute of admiration to the loveliness of the dead lady, discussed the leading article of that day's *Times* with perfect equanimity. What would you have? There can be but one person in the world to whom another is more than all the world beside.

This person was sitting by Nina's bed, except for a few brief minutes at a time, utterly stupefied and immovable. Even Maud—his cherished daughter Maud—whose smile had hitherto been welcome in his eyes as the light of morning, could not rouse his attention by the depth of her own uncontrolled grief. He sat like an idiot or an opium-eater, till something prompted him to open the window and gasp for a breath of fresh evening air. Then it all came back to him, and he awoke to the full consciousness of his misery.

There are men, though not many, and these, perhaps, the least inclined to prate about it, who have one attachment in their lives to which every other sentiment is but an accessory and a satellite. Such natures are often very bold to dare, very strong to endure, very difficult to assail, save in their single vulnerable point. Force that, and the man's whole vitality seems to collapse. He does not even make a fight of it, but fails, gives in, and goes down without an effort. Such was the character of Mr. Bruce, and to-day he had gotten his death-blow.

The stars twinkled out faintly one by one, the harvest-moon rose broad and ruddy behind the wooded hill, and

still he sat stupefied at the bedside. The door opened gently to admit a beautiful girl, strangely, startlingly like her dead mother, who came in with a cup of tea and a candle. Setting these on the chimney-piece, she moved softly round to where he sat, and pressed his head, with both hands, against her breast.

"Dearest father," said she, "I have brought you some tea. Try and rouse yourself, papa, dear papa, for *my* sake. You love *me* too."

The appeal was well chosen; once more the tears came to his eyes, and he woke up as from a dream.

"You are a good girl, Maud," he answered, with a vague, distracted air. "I have my children left—I have my children left! But all the world cannot make up to me for what I have lost!"

She thought his mind was wandering, and tried to recall him to himself.

"We must bear our sorrows as best we may, papa," she answered, very gently. "We must help each other. You and I are alone now in the world."

A contraction, as of some fresh pain, came over his livid face. He raised his head to speak, but, stopping himself with an obvious effort, looked long and scrutinisingly in his daughter's face.

Maud Bruce was a very beautiful girl even now, in the extremity of her sorrow. She had been crying heartily; no wonder, but her delicate features were not swollen, nor her dark eyes dimmed. The silky hair shone smooth and trim, the muslin dress was not rumpled nor disarranged, and the white hands, with which she still caressed her father's sorrow-laden head, neither shook nor wavered in their office.

With her mother's beauty, Miss Bruce had inherited but little of her mother's character; on the contrary, her nature, like that of her father's ancestors rather than his own, was bold, firm, and self-reliant to an unusual degree. She was hard, and that is the only epithet properly to describe her—manner, voice, appearance, all were lady-like, feminine, and exceedingly attractive; but the self-possession she never seemed to lose, would have warned an experienced admirer, that beneath the white bosom

beat a heart not to be reduced by stratagem, nor carried by assault; that he must not hope to see the beautiful dark eyes veil themselves in the dreamy softness which so confesses all it means to hide; that the raven tresses clinging coquettishly to that faultless head were most unlikely to be severed as a tribute of affection for any one whose conquest would not be a question of pride and profit to their owner. Tenderness was the one quality Maud lacked, the one quality which, like the zone of Venus, completed all her mother's attractions, with an indefinable and irresistible charm.

There is a wild German legend which describes how a certain woodman, a widower, gave shelter to a strangely fascinating dame, and falling in love with her, incontinently made his guest lawful mistress of hearth and home; how, notwithstanding his infatuated passion, and intense admiration for her beauty, there was yet in it a fierceness which chilled and repelled him, while he worshipped; how his children could never be brought to look in the fair face of their stepmother without crying aloud for fear; and how at last he discovered, to his horror and dismay, that he had wedded a fearful creature, half wolf, half woman, combining the seductions of the syren with the cruel voracity of the brute. There was something about Maud Bruce to remind one of that horrible myth, even now, now at her gentlest and softest, while she clung round a sorrowing father, by the death-bed of one, whom, in their different ways, both had very dearly loved.

It was well that the young lady preserved her presence of mind, for Bruce seemed incapable of connected thought or action. He roused himself, indeed, at his daughter's call, but gazed stupidly about him, stammered in his speech, and faltered in his step when he crossed the room. The shock of grief had evidently overmastered his faculties—something, too, besides affliction, seemed to worry and distress him—something of which he wished to unbosom himself, but that yet he could not make up his mind to reveal. Maud, whose quickness of perception was seldom at fault, did not fail to observe this, and reviewing the position with her accustomed coolness, drew her father gently to the writing-table, and sat down.

"Papa," said she, "there is much to be done. We must exert ourselves. It will do us both good. Bargrave can be down by the middle of the day, to-morrow. Let me write for him at once."

Bargrave and Co. were Mr. Bruce's solicitors, as they had been his great-uncle's: it was the same firm, indeed, that had apprised him of his inheritance at Calais twenty years ago. How he rejoiced in their intelligence then! What was the use of an inheritance now?

A weary lassitude had come over him; he seemed incapable of exertion, and shook his head in answer to Maud's appeal; but again some hidden motive stung him into action, and taking his seat at the writing-table, he seized a pen, only to let it slip helplessly through his fingers, while he looked in his daughter's face with a vacant stare.

Maud was equal to the occasion. Obviously something more than sorrow had reduced her father to this state. She sat down opposite, scribbled off a note hastily enough, but in the clear unwavering hand, affirmed by her correspondents to be so characteristic of the writer's disposition, and ringing the bell, desired it should be dispatched on the instant. "Let Thomas take the brougham with the ponies; the doctor is sure to be at home. He can bring him back at once."

Then she looked at her father, and stopped the lady's-maid, who, tearful and hysterical, had answered the familiar summons, which but this morning was "missis's bell."

"While they are putting to," said she calmly, "I will write a telegraphic message and a letter. Tell him to send word when he is ready. I shall give him exactly ten minutes."

Once more she glanced uneasily at Mr. Bruce; what she saw decided her. In half-a-dozen words she penned a concise message to her father's solicitor, desiring him to come himself or send a confidential person to Ecclesfield Manor, by the very first train, on urgent business; and wrote a letter as well to the same address, explaining her need of immediate assistance, for Mr. Bargrave to receive the following morning, in case that gentleman should not

obey her telegram in person, a contingency Miss Bruce considered highly probable.

The ten minutes conceded to Thomas had stretched to twenty before he was ready; for so strong is the force of habit among stablemen, that even in a case of life and death, horses cannot be allowed to start till their manes are straightened and their hoofs blacked. In the interval, Miss Bruce became more and more concerned to observe no signs of attention on her father's part—no inquiries as to her motives—apparently no consciousness of what she was doing. When the brougham was heard to roll away at a gallop, she came round and put her arm about his neck, where he sat in his chair at the writing-table.

"Papa, dear," she said, "I have told them to get your dressing-room ready. You are ill, very ill. I can see it. You must go to bed."

He nodded, and smiled. Such a weary, silly smile, letting her lead him away like a little child. He would even have passed the bed where his wife lay without a look, but that his daughter stopped him at the door.

"Papa," said she—and the girl deserved credit for the courage with which she kept her tears back—"won't you kiss her before you go?"

It may be some instinct warned her that not in the body was he to look on the face he loved again—that those material lips were never more to touch the gentle brow which in a whole lifetime he had not seen to frown—that their next greeting, freed from earthly anxieties, released from earthly troubles, must be exchanged, at no distant period, in heaven.

He obeyed unhesitatingly, imprinting a caress on his dead wife's forehead with no kind of emotion, and so left the room, muttering vaguely certain indistinct and incoherent syllables, in which the words "Nina" and "Bargrave" were alone intelligible.

Maud saw her father to his room, and consigned him to the hands of his valet, to be put to bed without delay. Then she went to the dining-room, and forced herself to eat a crust of bread, to drink a single glass of sherry. "I shall need all my strength to-night," thought the girl, "to take care of poor papa, and arrange about the funeral and

such matters as he cannot attend to—the funeral! O, mother, dear, kind mother! I wasn't half good enough to you while you were with us, and now—but I won't cry—I won't cry. There'll be time enough for all that by and by. The first thing to think of is about papa. He hasn't borne it well. Men have very little courage when they come to trial, and I fear—I fear there is something sadly wrong with him. Let me see. Three-quarters of an hour to get to Bragford—five minutes' stoppage at the turnpike, for that stupid man is sure to have gone to bed—five minutes more for Doctor Skilton to put on his great-coat, forty minutes for coming back—those ponies always go faster towards home. No, he can't be here under another hour. Another hour! It's a long time in a case like this. Suppose papa should have a paralytic stroke! And I haven't a notion what to do—the proper remedies, the best treatment. Women ought to know everything, and be ready for everything.

"Then there's the lawyer to-morrow. I don't suppose papa will be able to see him. I must think of all the business—all the arrangements. He can't be here till ten o'clock at the earliest, even if he starts by the first train. I shall write my directions for *him* in the morning. Meantime, I'll go and sit with poor papa, and see if I can't hush him off to sleep."

But when Miss Bruce reached her father's room, she found him lying in an alarming state of which she had no experience. Something between sleeping and waking, yet without the repose of the one, the consciousness of the other. So she took her place by his pillow, and watched, listening anxiously for the brougham that was to bring the doctor.

CHAPTER III

TOM RYFE

At half-past eight in the morning Mr. Bargrave's office in Gray's Inn was still empty. It had been swept, indeed, and "straightened," as he called it, by a young gentleman, whose duty it was to be in attendance at all hours from sunrise to sunset, when nobody else was in the way, and who fulfilled that duty by slipping out on such available occasions to join the youth of the quarter in sports of clamour, strength, and skill. Just now he was half-a-mile off in Holborn, running at full speed, shouting at the top of his voice, with no apparent object but that of exercising his own physical powers and the patience of the general public in his exertions. It was not, therefore, the step of this trusty guardian which fell sharp and quick on the stone stair outside the office, nor was it his hand, nor pass-key, that opened the door to admit Mr. Bargrave's nephew, assistant, and possible successor in the business, Tom Ryfe.

That gentleman entered with the air of a master, looked about him, detected the absence of his young subordinate as one who is disgusted rather than surprised, and lifted two envelopes lying unopened on the table with an oath. "As usual," he muttered, "telegram and letter, same date—same place. Arrive together, of course! Chances are, if there is any hurry you get the letter before the telegram. Halloa! here's a business. Bargrave's sure to be an hour late, and that young scamp not within a mile. If I had my way— Hang it! I *will* have my way.

At all events I must manage *this* business my way, for it seems there's not a moment to spare, and nobody to help me. Dorothe-a!"

The dirtiest woman to be found, probably, at that hour in the whole of London, appeared from a lower storey in answer to his summons. Pushing her hair off a grimy forehead with a grimier hand, she listened to his directions, staring vacantly, as is the manner of her kind, but understanding them, nevertheless, and not incapable of remembering their purport: they were short and intelligible enough.

"Tell that young scamp he is to sleep in the office to-night. He mustn't leave it on any consideration while I'm away. I'm going into the country, and I'll break his head when I come back."

Tom Ryfe then huddled the letter into his pocket for perusal at leisure, hailed a hansom, and in less than a quarter of an hour was in his uncle's breakfast-room, bolting ham, muffins, and green tea, while his clothes were packed.

Mr. Bargrave, a bachelor, who liked his comforts, and took care to have them, was reading the newspaper in a silk dressing-gown, and a pair of gold spectacles. He had finished breakfast—such a copious and leisurely repast as is consumed by one who dines at six, drinks a bottle of port every day at dessert, and never smoked a cigar in his life. No earthly consideration would hurry him for the next half-hour. He looked over the top of his newspaper with the placid benignity of a man who, considering digestion one of the most important functions of nature, values and encourages it accordingly.

"Sudden," observed Mr. Bargrave, in answer to his nephew's communication. "Something of a seizure, no doubt. Time is of importance; the young lady's telegram should have come to hand last night. Be so good as to make a note on the back. Three doctors, does she say? Bless me! They'll never let him get over it. Most unfortunate just now, on account of the child—of the young lady. You can take the necessary instructions. I will follow, if required. It's twenty-three minutes' drive to the station. Better be off at once, Tom."

So Tom took the hint, and was off. While he drives to the station we may as well give an account of Tom's position in the firm of Bargrave and Co.

Old Bargrave's sister had chosen to marry a certain Mr. Ryfe, of whom nobody knew more than that he could shoot pigeons, had been concerned in one or two doubtful turf transactions, and played a good hand at whist. *While* he lived, though it was a mystery *how* he lived, he kept Mrs. Ryfe "very comfortable," to use Bargrave's expression. When he died he left her nothing but the boy Tom, a precocious urchin, inheriting some of his father's sporting propensities, with a certain slang smartness of tone and manner, acquired in those circles where horseflesh is affected as an inducement to speculation.

Mrs. Ryfe did not long survive her husband. She had married a scamp, and was, therefore, very fond of him: so before he had been dead a year, she was laid in the same grave. Then her brother took the boy Tom, and put him into his own business, making him begin by sweeping out the office, and so requiring him to rise grade by grade till he became confidential clerk and head manager of all matters connected with the firm.

At twenty-six years of age, Tom Ryfe possessed as much experience as his principal, joined to a cunning and sharpness of intellect peculiarly his own. To take care of number one was doubtless the head clerk's ruling maxim; but while thus attending to his personal welfare, he never failed to affect a keen interest in the affairs of numbers two, three, four, and the rest. Tom Ryfe was a "friendly fellow," people declared; "a deuced friendly fellow, and knew what he was about, mind you, better than most people."

"Every great man," said the Emperor Nicholas, "has a hook in his nose." In the firmest characters, no doubt, there is a weakness by which they are to be led or driven; and Tom Ryfe, like other notabilities, was not without this crevice in his armour, this breach in his embattled wall. He had shrewdness, knowledge of the world, common sense, and yet the one great object of his efforts was to be admitted into a class of society far above his own, and to find there an ideal lady with whom to pass the rest of his days.

"I'll marry a top-sawyer," he used to say, whenever his uncle broached the question of his settlement in life. "Why, bless ye, it's the same tackle and the same fly that takes the big fish and the little one. It's no more trouble to make up to a duchess than a dairymaid. I'll pick a real white-handed one, you see if I don't. A wife that can *move*, uncle, cool, and calm, and lofty, like an air balloon; wearing her dresses as if she was made for them, and her jewels as if she didn't know she'd got them on; looking as much at home in the Queen's drawing-room as she does in her own. That's my sort, and that's the sort I'll choose! Why, there's scores of 'em to be seen any afternoon in the Park. Never tell me I can't go in and take my pick. 'Nothing venture, nothing have,' they say. I ain't going to venture much. I don't see occasion for it, but I'll *have* what I want, you see if I won't, or I'll know the reason why."

Whereon Bargrave, who considered womankind in general as an unnecessary evil, would reply—

"Time enough, Tom, time enough. I haven't had much experience with the ladies myself, except as clients, you know. The less I see of 'em, I think, the more I like 'em. Better put it off a little, Tom. It can be done any day, my boy, when you've an hour to spare. I wouldn't be in a hurry if I was you. There's a fresh sample ticketed every year; and they're not like port wine, you must remember, they don't improve with keeping."

Tom Ryfe had plenty of time to revolve his speculations, matrimonial and otherwise, during his journey to Ecclesfield Manor by one of those mid-day trains so irritating to through-passengers, which stop at intermediate stations, dropping brown-paper parcels, and taking up old women with baskets. He reviewed many little affairs of the heart in which he had lately been engaged, without, however, suffering his affections to involve themselves too deeply for speedy withdrawal. He reflected with great satisfaction on his own fastidious rejection of several "suitable parties," as he expressed it, who did not quite reach his standard of aristocratic perfection, remembering how Mrs. Blades, the well-to-do widow, with fine eyes and a

house in Duke Street, had fairly landed him but for that unfortunate dinner at which he detected her eating fish with a knife; how certain grated-looking needle-marks on Miss Glance's left forefinger had checked him just in time while in the act of kissing her hand; and how, on the very eve of a proposal to beautiful Constance de Courcy, whose manner, bearing, and appearance, no less than her name, denoted the extreme of refinement and high birth, he had sustained a shock, galvanic but salutary, from her artless exclamation, "O my! whatever shall I do? If here isn't pa!"

"No," thought Tom, as he rolled on into the fair expanse of down country that lay for miles round Ecclesfield, "I haven't found one yet quite up to the pattern I require. When I do I shall go in and win, that's all. I don't see why my chance shouldn't be as good as another's. I'm not such a bad-looking chap when I'm dressed and my hair's greased. I can do tricks with cards like winking. I can ride a bit, shoot a bit—'specially pigeons—dance a bit, and make love to 'em no end. I've got the gift of the gab, I know, and I stick at nothing. That's what the girls like, and that's what will pull me through when I find the one I want. Another station, and not there yet! What a slow train this is!"

It was a slow train, and Tom, arriving at Ecclesfield, saw on the face of the servant who admitted him that he was too late. In addition to the solemn and mysterious hush that pervades a house in which the dead lie yet unburied, a feeling of horror, the result of some unlooked-for and additional calamity, seemed to predominate; and Tom was hardly surprised, however much he might be shocked, when the old butler gasped, in broken sentences, "Seizure—last night—quite unconscious—all over this morning. Will you take some refreshment, sir, after your journey?"

Mr. Bruce had been dead a few hours—dead without time to set his house in order, without consciousness even to wish his child good-bye.

She came down to see Mr. Bargrave's clerk that afternoon, pale, calm, collected, beautiful, but stern and unbending under the sorrow against which her haughty nature rebelled. In a few words, referring to a memorandum the

while, she gave him her directions for the funeral and its ceremonies; desired him to ascertain at once the state of her late father's affairs, the amount of a succession to which she believed herself entitled; begged he would return with full information that day fortnight; ordered luncheon for him in the dining-room; and so dismissed him as a bereaved queen might dismiss the humblest of her subjects.

Tom Ryfe, returning to London by the next train, thought he had never felt so small; and yet, was not this proud, sorrowing, and beautiful young damsel the ideal he had been seeking hitherto in vain? It is not too much to say that for twenty miles he positively *hated* her, striving fiercely against the influence, which yet he could not but acknowledge. In another twenty, his good opinion of his best friend Mr. Ryfe reasserted itself. He had seen something of the world, and possessed, moreover, a certain shallow acquaintance with human nature, not of the highest class, so he argued thus—

"Women like what they are unaccustomed to. The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein makes love to a private soldier simply because she don't know what a private soldier is. This girl must have lived amongst a set of starched and stuck-up people who have not two ideas beyond themselves and their order. She has never so much as seen a smart, business-like, active fellow, ready to take all trouble off her hands, and make up her mind for her before she can turn round—young, too, and not so bad-looking, though I dare say she's used to good-looking chaps enough. The man's game who went in for Miss Bruce would be this: constant attention to her interests, supreme disregard for her feelings, and never to let her have her own way for a moment. She'd be so utterly taken aback she'd give in without a fight. Why shouldn't I try my chance? It's a good spec. It must be a good spec. And yet, hang it! such a high-handed girl as that would suit *me* without a shilling. It dashed me a little at first; but I like that scornful way of hers, I own. What eyes, too! and what hair! I wonder if I'm a fool. No; nothing's impossible; it's only difficult. What! London already? Ah! there's no place like town."

The familiar gas-lamps, the roll of the cabs, the bustle in the streets, dispelled whatever shadows of mistrust in his own merits remained from Tom's reflections in the railway carriage; and long before he reached his uncle's house, he had made up his mind to "go in," as he called it, for Miss Bruce, morally confident of winning, yet troubled with certain chilling misgivings, as fearing that *this* time he had really fallen in love.

Many and long, during the ensuing week, were the consultations between old Bargrave and his nephew as to the future prospects of the lady in question. Her father had died without a will. That fact seemed pretty evident, as he had often expressed his intention of preparing such an instrument, but had hitherto moved no farther in the matter.

"Depend upon it, Tom," said his uncle, that very evening over their port wine, "he wouldn't go to anybody else. He was never much of a business man, and he couldn't have disentangled his affairs sufficiently to make 'em clear, except to me. It's a sad pity for many reasons, but I'm just as sure there's no will as I am that my glass is empty. Help yourself, Tom, and pass the wine."

"Then she takes as next of kin," said Tom, thinking of Maud's dark eyes, and filling his glass. "Here's her health!"

"By all means," assented Bargrave. "Her very good health, poor girl! But as to the succession I have my doubts; grave doubts. There's a trust, Tom. I looked over the deed while you were down there to-day. It is so worded that a male heir might advance a prior claim. There *is* a male heir, a parson in Dorsetshire, not a likely man to give in without a fight. We'll look at it again to-morrow. If it reads as I think, I wouldn't give a pinch of snuff for the young lady's chance."

Tom's face fell. "Can't we fight it, uncle?" said he, stoutly, applying himself once more to the port; but Bargrave had drawn his silk handkerchief over his face, and was already fast asleep.

So uncle and nephew went into the trust-deed, morning after morning, arriving in its perusal at a conclusion adverse to Miss Bruce's interest; but then, as the younger

man observed, "the beauty of our English law is, that you can always fight a thing even if you haven't a leg to stand on."

It was almost time for Tom Ryfe's return journey to Ecclesfield, and a coat ordered for the express purpose of captivating Miss Bruce had actually come home, when the post brought him a little note from that lady, which afforded him, as such notes often do, an absurd and overweening joy. It was bordered with the deepest black, and ran as follows—

"DEAR SIR,

('*Dear* sir,' thought Tom, 'ah! that sounds much sweeter than plain sir")—I venture to trouble you with a commission in the nature of business. A packet, containing some diamond ornaments belonging to me, will be left by the jeweller at Mr. Bargrave's office to-morrow. Will you kindly bring it down with you to Ecclesfield?

"Yours, very obediently,

"MAUD BRUCE."

Tom kissed the signature. He was very far gone already, and took care to be at the office in time to receive the diamonds. That boy was out of the way, of course! So Tom summoned the grimy Dorothea to his presence.

"I shall be busy for an hour," said he; "don't admit anybody unless he comes by appointment, except it's a man with a packet of jewelry. Take it in yourself, and bring it here at once. I've got to carry it down with me to-night by the train. Do you understand?"

"Is it a long journey as you're a-goin', sir?" asked Dorothea. "I should like to clean up a bit while you was away."

"Only to Bragford," answered Tom; "but I might not be back for a day or two. Mind about the parcel, though," he added, in the exuberance of his spirits. "The thing's valuable. It's for a young lady. It's jewels, Dorothea. It's diamonds."

"Lor!" said Dorothea, going back to her scrubbing forthwith.

The jeweller being dilatory, Tom had finished his letters before that artificer arrived, thus saving Dorothea all responsibility in the valuable packet confided to his charge, for Mr. Ryfe received it himself in the outer office, whither he had resorted in a fidget to compare a time-table with a railway-map of England. He fretted to set off at once. He had finished his business; he had nothing to do now but eat an early dinner at his uncle's, and so start by the afternoon train on the path of love, triumph, and success, leaving the boy, coerced by ghastly threats, to take charge of the office in his absence.

We have all seen a bird moulting, draggled, dirty, woe-begone, not to be recognised for the same bird, sleek and glossy in its holiday-suit of feathers, pruning its wing for a flight across the summer sky. Even so different was the Dorothea of the unkempt hair, the soapy arms, the dingy apron, and the grimy face, from a gaudy damsel who emerged in the afternoon sun out of Mr. Bargrave's chambers, bright with all the colours of the rainbow, and scrupulously dressed, according to the extreme style of the last prevailing fashion but two.

She was a good-looking woman enough now that she had "cleaned herself," as she expressed it, but for a certain roughness of hair, coarseness of skin, and general redundancy of outline, despite of which drawbacks, however, she attracted many admiring glances from cab-drivers, omnibus-conductors, a precocious shoeblack, and the policeman on duty, as she tripped into Holborn and mingled with the living stream that flows unceasingly down that artery of London.

Dorothea seemed to know where she was going well enough, and yet the coarse red cheek turned pale while she approached her goal, though it was but a flashy, dirty-looking gin-shop, standing at a corner where two streets met. Her colour rose though, higher than before, when a pot-boy, with a shock of red hair, and his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his shoulders, thus accosted her—

"You're just in time, miss; he'd 'a been off in a minit, but old Batters, he come in just now, and your young man stopped to take his share of another half-quartern."

CHAPTER IV

GENTLEMAN JIM

THERE is no reason, because a woman is coarse, hard-working, low-born, and badly dressed, she should be without that inconvenient feminine appendage—a heart. Dorothea trembled and turned pale when the door of the Holborn gin-shop swung open and the man she most wished to see in all the world stood at her side.

He would have been a good-looking fellow enough in any rank of life, but to Dorothea, and others of her class, his clear, well-cut features and jetty ringlets rendered him an absolute Adonis, despite the air of half-drunken bravado and assumed recklessness which marred a naturally resolute expression of countenance. He wore a fur cap, a velveteen jacket, and a bright-red neckcloth, secured by an enormous ring; nor was this remarkable costume out of character with the perfume he exhaled, denoting he had consumed at least his share of that other half-quartern which postponed his departure.

Dorothea slipped her arm in his, and clung to him with the fond tenacity of a woman who loves heart and soul, poor thing, to her cost.

His manner was an admirable combination of low-class gallantry with pitying condescension.

"Why, Doll," said he, "what's up now? You don't look hearty, my lass. Step in and take a dram; it'll do you good."

She glanced admiringly in the comely dissipated face.

"Ah! they may well call you Gentleman Jim," she

answered; "you're fit to be a lord of the land, you are; and so you would, if I was queen. But I doesn't want you to treat me, Jim, leastways not this turn; I wants you to come for a walk, dear. I've a bit of news for you. It's business, Jim," she added, somewhat ruefully, "or I wouldn't go for to ask."

His face, which had fallen a little, assuming that wearied expression a woman ought most to dread on the face she cares for, brightened considerably.

"Come on, lass!" he exclaimed, "business first, and pleasure arter. Speak up, and let's hear all about it."

They had turned from the main thoroughfare into a dark and quiet by-street. She crossed her work-worn hands on his arm, and proceeded nervously—

"You say I never put you on a job, Jim. Well, I've a job to put you on now. I don't half like it, dear. It's for your sake I don't half like it. Promise me as you'll be careful, very careful, this turn."

"Bother!" answered Jim. "Stow that, lass, and let's have it out."

Thus elegantly adjured, Doll, as he called her, obeyed without delay, though her voice faltered and her colour faded more than once while she went on.

"You told me as you wouldn't love me without I kep' my ears open, and my eyes too. Well, Jim, I've watched and watched old master and young, like a cat watches a mouse-hole, till I've been that sick and tired I could have set down and cried. Now, to-day I wanted to see you so bad, at any rate, and, thinks I, here's a bit of news as my Jim will like to learn. Look now: young master, he's a-goin' to a place they call Bragford by the five-o'clock train. O, I mind the name well enough. You know, Jim, you always bid me take notice of names. Well, it's Bragford. Bragford, says he, quite plain, an' as loud as I'm a-speakin' now."

"Forty-five miles from London," answered Jim, "and not ten minutes' walk from the branch line. Well?"

"He's a-takin' summut down for a young lady," continued Doll. "It is but a small package, what you might put in your coat-pocket, or your hat. O, Jim! Jim! if you should chance on a stroke of luck this turn, won't you

give the trade up for good and all? If you and me had but a roof to cover us, I wouldn't ask better than only liberty to work for you till I dropped."

Tears stood in her eyes, and for a moment the face that looked up into the ruffian's was almost beautiful in its expression of entire devotion and trust.

He had taken a doubtful cigar from his coat-pocket, and was smoking thoughtfully.

"Small," said he, "then it ought, by rights, to be valuable. Did ye get a feel of it, Doll, or was it only a smell?"

"He took it hisself out of the jeweller's hands," answered Doll; "but I hadn't no call to be curious, for he told me what it was free enough. There ain't no smell about diamonds, Jim."

"Nor you can't swear to them neither," replied Jim exultingly. "Diamonds, Doll! you're *sure* he said diamonds? Come, you *have* done it, my lass. Give us a kiss, Doll, and let's turn in here at the Sunflower, and drink good luck to the job."

The woman acceded to both proposals readily enough, but followed her companion into the ill-favoured little tavern with a weary step and a heavy heart. Some unerring instinct told her, no doubt, that she was giving all and taking nothing, offering gold for silver, truth for falsehood, love and devotion for a mere liking, rapidly waning to indifference and contempt.

Tom Ryfe, all anxiety to find himself once more in the same county with Miss Bruce, was in good time, we may be sure, for the train that should carry him down to Ecclesfield. Bustling through the station to take his ticket, he was closely followed by a well-dressed person in a pair of blue spectacles, travelling apparently without luggage or impediments of any description. This individual seemed also bound for Bragford, and showed some little eagerness to travel in the same carriage with Tom, who attributed the compliment to his lately-constructed coat and general appearance as a swell of the first water. "He don't often get such a chance," thought Mr. Ryfe, accepting with extreme graciousness the other's civilities as to open windows and change of seats. He

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even went so far as to take a proffered cigar from the case of his fellow-traveller, which he would have smoked forthwith, but for the peremptory objections of a crusty old gentleman, who arrived at the last moment, encumbered with such a paraphernalia of railway-rugs, travelling-bags, books, newspapers and magazines as denoted the through-passenger, not to be got rid of at any intermediate station. The old gentleman glared defiance, but made himself comfortable nevertheless; and the presence of this common enemy was a bond of union to render the two chance acquaintances more than ordinarily cordial and communicative.

Smoking being prohibited, they had not proceeded many miles into the country ere the gentleman in spectacles produced a box of lozenges from his pocket, and, selecting one for his own consumption, offered another, with much suavity, to Tom Ryfe, surveying meanwhile, with inquisitive glances, the bulge in that gentleman's breast-pocket, where he carried his valuable package; but here again both were startled, not to say irritated, by the dictatorial interference of the last arrival.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said this irrepressible old man, "I cannot permit it. Damn me, sir!" turning full round upon Tom Ryfe, "I *won't* permit it! I can detect the smell of chloroform in those lozenges. Smell, sir, I've the smell of a bloodhound. I could hunt a scamp all over England by nose—by nose, I tell you, sir, and worry him to death when I ran into him; and I *would* too. Now, sir, if *you* choose to be chloroformed, I don't. I'm not anxious to be taken out of this compartment as stupid as an owl, and as cold as a cabbage, with a pain in my eyes, a singing in my ears, and a scoundrel's hands in my waistcoat-pockets. Excuse me, sir, I'm warm—I wouldn't give much for a chap that wasn't—and I speak my mind!"

It seemed a bad speculation to quarrel with him, this big, burly, resolute, and disagreeable old man. Tom Ryfe, for once, was at a nonplus. He murmured a few vague sentences of dissent, while the passenger in spectacles, consigning his lozenges to an inner pocket, buried himself in the broad sheet of the *Times*. But it was his turn now,

and not even thus could he escape. Staring grimly at him, over the top of the paper, his tormentor fired a point-blank question, from which there was no refuge.

"Pray, sir," said he, "are you a chemist?"

The gentleman in spectacles signified, by a shake of the head, that was not his profession.

"Then, sir," continued the other, "do you know anything about chemistry—volatile essences, noxious drugs, subtle poisons? I do." (Here Tom Ryfe observed his ally turn pale.) "Permit me to remark, sir, that if *you* don't, you are like a school-boy carrying a pocketful of squibs and crackers on the fifth of November, unconscious that a single spark may blow him into the Christmas holidays before he can say 'knife!' Let me see those lozenges, sir—let me have them in my hand; I'll tell you in five seconds what they're made of, and how, and where, and why."

Here the man in spectacles, with considerable presence of mind, threw the whole of his lozenges out of window, under cover of the *Times*.

"You frighten me, sir," said he; "I wouldn't keep such dangerous articles about me on any consideration."

The old gentleman executed an elaborate wink, denoting extreme satisfaction, at Tom Ryfe. "If you were going through," said he, "I could tell you some funny stories. Queer tricks upon travellers I've seen in my time. Why I was the first person to find out the sinking-floor dodge in West Street. My evidence transported three people for life, and a fourth for fifteen years. I once saw a man pulled down by the heels through a grating in one of the busiest streets in the City, and if I *hadn't* seen him he would never have come up alive. Why the police apply to me for advice many a time when people are missing. 'Don't distress yourselves,' says I, 'they'll turn up, never fear.' And they *do* turn up, sir, in nineteen cases out of twenty. In the twentieth, when there's foul play, we generally know something about it within eight-and-forty hours. Bragford? Is it? You get out here, do you? Good-morning, gentlemen; I hope you've enjoyed your jaunt."

Then as Tom, collecting great-coats, newspapers, etc.,

followed his new acquaintance out of the carriage, this strange old gentleman detained him for an instant by the arm.

"Friend of yours, sir?" said he, pointing to the man in spectacles on the platform. "Never saw him before? I thought so. Sharper, sir, I'll take my oath of it, or something worse. I know the sort; I've exposed hundreds of them. Take my advice, sir, and never see him again."

With that the train glided on, leaving Mr. Ryfe and the gentleman in spectacles staring at each other over a basket of fish and a portmanteau.

"Mad!" observed the latter, with an uneasy attempt at a laugh, and a readjustment of his glasses.

"Mad, no doubt," answered Tom, but followed the lunatic's counsel, nevertheless, so far as to refrain from offering the other a lift in the well-appointed brougham, with its burly coachman, waiting to convey him to Ecclesfield Manor, though his late fellow-traveller was proceeding in that direction on foot.

Tom had determined to sleep at the Railway Hotel, Bragford, ere he returned to London next day. This arrangement he considered more respectful than an intrusion on the hospitality of Ecclesfield, should it be offered him. Perhaps so scrupulous a regard for the proprieties mollified Miss Bruce in his favour, and called forth an invitation to tea in the drawing-room when he had concluded the solitary dinner prepared for him after his journey.

Tom Ryfe was always a careful dresser. Up to forty most men are. It is only when we have nobody to please that we become negligent of pleasing. I believe, though, that never in his life did he tie his neckcloth or brush his whiskers with more care than on the present occasion in a large and dreary chamber known to the household as one of the "best bedrooms" of Ecclesfield Manor.

Tom looked about him, with a proud consciousness that at last his foot was on the ladder he had wanted all his life to climb. Here he stood, actually dressing for dinner, a welcome guest in the house of an old-established county family, on terms of confidence, if not intimacy, with its proud and beautiful female representative, in whose cause

he was about to do battle with all the force of his intellect, and (Tom began to think she could make him fool enough for anything) all the resources of his purse. The old family pictures—sad daubs, or they would never have been consigned to the bedrooms—simpered down on him with encouraging benignity. Prim women, wearing enormously long waists, and their heads a good deal on one side, pointed their fans at him, while he washed his hands, with a coquetry irresistible, had their colours only stood, combining entreaty and command; while a jolly old boy in flowing wig, steel breast-plate, and the most convivial of noses, smiled in his face, as who should say, "*Audaces Fortuna juvat!*—Go in, my hearty, and win if you can!"

What was there in these surroundings, in the orderly decorum of the well-regulated mansion, in the chiming of the stable clock, nay, in the reflection of his own person shown by that full-length glass, to take the starch, as it were, out of Tom's self-confidence, turning his moral courage limp and helpless for the nonce, bringing insensibly to his mind the familiar refrain of "Not for Joseph"? What was there that bade him man himself against this discouragement, as true bravery mans itself against the sensation of fear? and why should he be less worthy of approbation than other spirits who venture on "enterprises of great pith and moment" with beating hearts indeed, but with unflinching courage and a dogged determination to succeed?

Had Tom been a young knight arming for a tournament, in which the good fortune of his lance was to win him a king's daughter for his bride, he might have claimed to be an admirable and interesting hero. Was he, indeed, a less respectable adventurer, that for steel he had to substitute French polish, for surcoat and corselet, broadcloth and cambric—that the battle he was to wage must be fought out by tenacity of purpose and ingenuity of brain, rather than strength of arm and downright hardness of skull?

He shook a little too much scent on his handkerchief as he finished dressing, and walked down-stairs in a state of greater agitation than he would have liked to admit.

Dinner was soon done. Eaten in solitude with grave

servants watching every mouthful, he was glad to get it over. In a glass of brown sherry he drank Miss Bruce's health, and thus primed, followed the butler to the drawing-room, where that lady sat working by the light of a single lamp.

The obscurity was in his favour. Tom made his bow and accepted the chair offered him, less awkwardly than was to be expected from the situation.

Maud looked very beautiful with the light falling on her sculptured chin, her fair neck, and white hands, set off by the deep shadows of the mourning dress she wore.

I believe he was going to begin by saying "it had been a fine day," but she stopped him in her clear, cold voice, with its patrician accent, so difficult to define, yet so impossible to mistake.

"I have to thank you, Mr. Ryfe, for taking such care of my jewels. I hope the man left them at your office as he promised, and that you had no farther trouble about them."

He wanted to say that "no errand of hers could be a trouble to *him*," but the words stuck in his throat, or she would hardly have proceeded so graciously.

"We must go into a few matters of business this evening, if you have got the papers you mentioned. I leave here to-morrow, and there is little time to spare."

He produced a neatly-folded packet, docketed and carefully tied with tape. The sight of it roused his energies, as the shaking of a guidon rouses an old trooper. Despite of the enchantress and all her glamour, Tom was himself again.

"Business is my trade, Miss Bruce," said he briskly. "I must ask your earnest attention for a quarter of an hour, while I explain our position as regards the estate. At present it appears beset with difficulties. That's my look-out. Before we begin," added Tom, with a diffident faltering of voice, partly natural, partly assumed, "forgive my asking your future address. It is indispensable that we should frequently communicate, and—and—I cannot help hoping and expressing my hope for your happiness in the home you have chosen."

Maud's smile was very taking. She smiled with her

eyes, those dark, pleasing eyes that would have made a fool of a wiser man than Tom.

"I am going to Aunt Agatha's," she said. "I am to live with her for good. I have no home of my own now."

The words were simple enough—spoken, too, without sadness or bitterness as a mere abstract matter of fact, but they aroused all the pen-and-ink chivalry in Tom's nature, and he vowed in his heart to lay goose-quill in rest on her behalf, with the devotion of a Montmorency or a Bayard.

"Miss Bruce," said he resolutely, "the battle is not yet lost. In our last, of the 15th, we advised you that the other side had already taken steps to oppose our claims. My uncle has great experience, and I will not conceal from you that my uncle is less sanguine than myself; but I begin to see my way, and if there is a possibility of winning, by hook or by crook, depend upon it, Miss Bruce, win we *will*, for our own sakes, and—and—for *yours!*"

The last two words were spoken in a whisper, being indeed a spontaneous ebullition, but she heard them nevertheless. In her deep sorrow, in her friendless, homeless position there was something soothing and consolatory in the sympathy of this young man, lawyer's clerk though he were, as she insisted with unnecessary repetition to herself. He showed at his best, too, while explaining the legal complications involved in the whole business, and the steps by which he hoped eventually to succeed. Maud was too thoroughly a woman not to admire power, and Tom's intellect possessed obviously no small share of that quality, when directed on such matters as the present. In half-an-hour he had furnished her with a lucid statement of the whole case, and in half-an-hour he had inspired her with respect for his opinion, admiration of his sagacity, and confidence in his strength—not a bad thirty minutes' work. At its conclusion, she shook hands with him cordially when she wished him good-night. Tom was no fool, and knew when to venture as when to hold back. He bowed reverentially over the white hand, muttering only—"God bless you, Miss Bruce! If you think of anything else, at a moment's notice I will come from the end of the world to serve you,"—and so hurried away before she could reply.

CHAPTER V

THE CRACKSMAN'S CHECKMATE

PUCKERS, or Miss Puckers, as she liked to be called below-stairs, was a little puzzled by her young mistress's abstraction, while she brushed out Maud's wealth of raven hair for the night. Stealing glances at herself in the glass opposite, she could not help observing the expression on Miss Bruce's face. The light was in it once more that had been so quenched by her father's death. Puckers, who, in the housekeeper's room, had discussed the affairs of the family almost hourly ever since that sorrowful event, considered that it must have left his daughter in the possession of untold wealth, and that "the young man from town," as she designated Tom Ryfe, was sent down expressly to afford the heiress an estimate of her possessions. A true lady's-maid, she determined to hazard the inquiry.

"I suppose, miss," said she, brushing viciously, "we sha'n't be going to your aunt's now quite so soon. I'm sure I've been that hurried and put about, I don't scarce know which way to turn."

"Why?" asked Maud quietly. "Not so hard, please."

"Well, miss, a lady is not like a servant, you know; she can do as she chooses, of course. But if I was *you*, miss, I'd remain on the spot. There's the new furniture to get; there's the linen to see to; there's the bailiff given warning; and that there young man from town, I suppose *he* wouldn't come if we could do without him, charging goodness knows what, as if his very words was gold. But

I give you joy, miss, of your fortune, I do. I was a-sayin', only last night, was it? to Mrs. Plummer, says I, 'Whatever *my* young lady will do,' says I, 'in a house where she isn't mistress, she that's been used to rule in her poor ma's time, and her pa's, ah! ever since she cut her teeth almost;' and Mrs. Plummer says, says she——"

"That'll do, Puckers," observed Miss Bruce, "I shall not want you any more. Good-night."

She took as little notice of her handmaid's volubility as if the latter had been a grey parrot, and dismissed her with a certain cold, imperial manner that none of the household ever dreamt it possible to dispute or disobey; but after Puckers, with a quantity of white draperies over her arm, had departed to return no more, she sat down at the dressing-table, and began to think with all her might.

Her maid was a fool, no doubt: all maids were; but the shaft of folly, shot at random, went home to the quick. "A house where she wasn't mistress!" Had she ever considered the future shelter offered her by Aunt Agatha in that light? Here at the Manor, for as long as she could remember, had she not reigned supreme? All the little arrangements of dinner-parties, picnics, archery-meetings, and such gatherings as make up country society, had fallen into her hands. Mamma didn't care—mamma never cared how anything was settled so long as papa was pleased; and papa thought Maud could not possibly do wrong. So by degrees—and this at an age when young ladies are ordinarily in the schoolroom—Miss Bruce had grown, on all social questions, to be the virtual head of the family. It was a position of which, till the time came to abdicate, she had not sufficiently appreciated the value. It seemed so natural to order carriages and horses at her own hours, to return visits, to receive guests, to do the honours of a comfortable country-house with an adequate establishment, and now, could she bear to live with Aunt Agatha, on sufferance?—Aunt Agatha, whom she had never liked, and whom she only refrained from snubbing and setting down, because they so seldom met, but when the elder lady had been invited by the younger as a guest! "To be dependent," thought Maud, mentally

addressing the beautiful face in the glass. "How should you like that? *you* with your haughty head, and your scornful eyes, and your hard, unbending heart? I know you! Nobody knows you but me! And I know how *bad* you are—how capricious, and how cruel! When you want anything, do you ever spare anybody to get it? Did you ever love any one on earth as well as your own way? Even mamma? O, mamma, dear, dear mamma, if you had lived I might have got better—I *was* better, I know I was better while I was with *you*. But now—now I must be myself. I can't help it. After all, it is not my fault. What is it I most covet and desire in the world? It is power. Rank, wealth, luxury—these are all very well as accessories of life; but how should I loathe and hate them if they were conditional on my thinking as other people thought, or doing what I was told! I ought to have been a man. Women are such weak, vapid, idiotic characters, in general—at least, all I meet down here. Engrossed with their children, their parishes, their miserable household cares and perplexities. While in London, I believe there are women who actually lead a party and turn out a minister. But they are beautiful, of course. Well—and me? I don't think I am so much amiss. With my looks and the position I ought to have, surely I might hold my own with the best of them. But what good will my looks do me if I am to be a dependent on Aunt Agatha? No. Without the estate I am nothing. With it I might be *anything*. This lawyer thinks he can win it for me. I wonder if he knows. How clever he seems! and how thoughtful! Nothing escapes him, and nothing seems to take him by surprise. And yet what a fool I could make of him if I chose. I saw it before he had been five minutes in the room. I wonder now what he thinks of *me!*—whether he has the presumption to suppose I could ever allow him to betray what he cared for me. I believe I should rather admire his impudence! It is pleasant to be cared for, even by an inferior; and, after all, this Mr. Ryfe is not without his good points. He has plenty of talent and energy, and I should think audacity. By his own account he sticks at nothing, when he means winning, and he certainly means to win for me if he can. I never

saw anybody so eager, so much in earnest. Perhaps he thinks that if he could come to me and say, 'There, Miss Bruce, I have saved your birthright for you, and I ask nothing but one kind word in return,' I might be disposed to give it, and something more. Well, I don't know. Perhaps it would be as good a way as any other of getting into favour. One thing is certain. The inheritance I must preserve at every sacrifice. Dear me, how late it is! I ought to have been in bed hours ago. Puckers, is that you?"

Puckers did not answer, and a faint rustle in the adjoining room, which had called forth Miss Bruce's question, ceased the instant she spoke aloud.

This young lady was not nervous; far from it; yet her watch seemed to tick with extraordinary vigour, and her heart to beat harder than common while she listened.

The door of communication between the two rooms was closed. Another door in the smaller apartment opened to the passage, but this, she remembered, was habitually locked on the inside. It couldn't be Puckers, therefore, who thus disturbed her mistress's reflections, unless that handmaiden had come down the chimney, or in at the window.

In this smaller room Miss Bruce kept her riding-habits, her ball-dresses, her draperies of different fabric, her transparencies of all kinds, and her jewels.

The house was very silent—so silent, that in the distant corridors were distinctly audible those faint and ghostly footfalls, which traverse all large houses after midnight. There were candles burning on Maud's toilet-table, but they served rather to show how dismal were the shadowy corners of the large, lofty bedroom, than to afford light and confidence to its inmate.

She listened intently. Yes; she was sure she heard somebody in the next room—a step that moved stealthily about; a noise as of woodwork skilfully and cautiously forced open.

One moment she felt frightened. Then her courage came back the higher for its interruption. She could have escaped from her own room into the passage, easily enough, and so alarmed the house; but when she reflected

that its fighting garrison consisted only of an infirm old butler—for the footman was absent on leave—there seemed little to be gained by such a proceeding, if violence or robbery were really intended. Besides, she rather scorned the idea of summoning assistance till she had ascertained the amount of danger.

So she blew her candle out, crept to the door of the little room, and laid her hand noiselessly on its lock.

Softly as she turned it, gently as she pushed the door back on its hinges inch by inch, she did not succeed in entering unobserved. The light of a shaded lantern flashed over her the instant she crossed the threshold, dazzling her eyes indeed, yet not so completely but that she made out the figure of a man standing over her shattered jewel-box, of which he seemed to have been rifling the contents. Quick as thought, she said to herself, "Come, there is only one! If I can frighten *him* more than he frightens *me*, the game is mine."

The man swore certain ghastly oaths in a whisper, and Maud was aware of the muzzle of a pistol covering her above the dark lantern.

She wondered why she wasn't frightened, not the least frightened—only rather angry and intensely determined to save the jewels, and have it out.

She could distinguish a dark figure behind the spot of intense light radiating round her own person, and perceived, besides, almost without looking, that an entrance had been made by the window, which stood wide open to disclose the topmost rounds of a garden-ladder, borrowed doubtless from the tool-house, propped against its sill.

What the housebreaker saw was a vision of dazzling beauty in a flood of light. A pale, queenly woman, with haughty, delicate face, and loops of jet-black hair, falling over robes of white, erect and dauntless, fronting his levelled weapon without the slightest sign of fear.

He had never set eyes on such a sight as this; no, neither in circus nor music-hall, nor gallery of metropolitan theatre at Christmas. For a moment he lost his head—for a moment he hesitated.

In that moment Miss Bruce showed herself equal to the occasion.

Quick as thought, she made one step to the window, pushed the ladder outwards with all her force, and shut down the sash. As it closed, the ladder, poising for an instant, fell with a crash on the gravel below.

"Now," she said quietly, "you are trapped and taken. Better make no resistance, for the gamekeepers watching below are a rough sort of people, and I do not wish to see you ill-treated."

The man was aghast! What could it all mean? Was he awake or dreaming? She must be well backed, he said to himself, to assume such a position as this; and she looked so beautiful—so beautiful!

The latter consideration was not without its effect on him, even in the exercise of his profession. "Gentleman Jim," as his mates affirmed in their nervous English, became a fool of the deepest crimson dye whenever a woman was concerned, and this woman was in his eyes as an angel of light.

Nevertheless, instinctively rather than of intention, he muttered hoarsely—

"Drop it, miss, I warn you. One word out loud and I'll shoot, as sure as you stand there."

"Shoot away!" she answered with perfect composure; "you will save me the trouble of giving an alarm. They expect it, and are waiting for it every moment below-stairs. Light those candles, and let us see what damage you have done before you return the plunder."

A pair of wax-candles stood on the chimney-piece, and he obeyed mechanically, wondering at himself the while. His cunning, however, had not entirely deserted him, and he left his pistol lying on the table, ready to snatch it away if she tried to take possession. It was thus he gauged her confidence, and seeing she scarcely noticed the weapon, argued that powerful assistance must be near at hand to render this beautiful young lady so arbitrary and so unconcerned. His admiration burst out in spite of his discomfiture and critical position.

"Well, you *are* a cool one!" he exclaimed, in accents of mingled vexation and approval. "A cool one and a stunner, I'm blessed if you ain't! No offence, but I never see your likes yet, not since I was born. Come, miss, let's

cry quits. You pass me out o' this on the quiet. I dessay as I can make shift to get down without the ladder, an' I'll leave all these here gimcracks just as I found 'em. Now I've seen ye once, I'm blessed if I'd take so much as an ear-drop, unless it was in the way of a keepsake. Pass me out, miss, and I'll promise—no, I'm blowed if I think as I *can* promise—never to come here no more."

Undisguised admiration—the admiration always acceptable to a woman when accompanied with respect—shone in Gentleman Jim's dark eyes. He seemed under a spell, and while he acknowledged its strength, had no power, nay, had no wish, to resist its influence. When on such jobs as these it was his habit to observe an unusual sobriety. He was glad now to think of his adherence to that rule. Had he been drunk, he might, peradventure, have insulted this divinity. What had come over him? He felt almost pleased to know he was in her power, and yet she treated him like the dirt beneath her feet.

"No insolence, sir," she said in a commanding voice. "Let me see, first of all, that every one of my trinkets is in its place. There, that bracelet would have brought you money, those diamonds would have been valuable if you could have got them clear off. You must have learned your trade very badly to suppose that with such things in the house we keep no guard. Come, I am willing to believe that distress brought you to this. Listen. You are in my power, and I will show you mercy. If I give you five pounds now, on the spot, and let you go, will you promise to try and get your bread as an honest man?"

The tears came in his eyes. This woman, then, that looked so like an angel, was angel all through. Yet, touched as he felt in his better nature, the proletary instinct bade him try once more if her effort to get rid of him originated in pity or fear, and he muttered, "Guineas! make it guineas, miss, and I'll say 'done.'"

"Not a shilling more, not a farthing," she answered, moving her hand as if to put it on the bell-pull. "It cannot matter to me," she added, in a tone of the most complete indifference, "but while I am about it I think I would rather be the making of an honest man than the destruction of a rogue."

Her acting was perfect. She seemed so cold, so impassive, so completely mistress of the position, and all the time her heart was beating as the gambler's beats, albeit in winning vein, ere he lifts the box from off the imprisoned dice—as the lion-tamer's beats when he spurns in its very den the monster that could crush him with a movement, and that yet he holds in check by an imaginary force, irresistible only so long as it is unresisted.

Such situations have a horrible fascination of their own. I have even known them prolonged to gratify a morbid thirst for excitement; but I think Miss Bruce was chiefly anxious to be released from her precarious position, and to get rid of her visitor as soon as she could. Even her resolute nerves were beginning to give way, and she knew her own powers well enough to mistrust a protracted trial of endurance. Feminine fortitude is so apt to break down all at once, and Miss Bruce, though a courageous specimen of her sex, was but a woman who had wrought herself up for a gallant effort, after all.

She was quite unprepared though for its results. Gentleman Jim snatched up his pistol, stowed it away in his breast-pocket, as if heartily ashamed of it, brought out from that receptacle a pearl necklace and a pair of coral ear-rings, dashed them down on the table with an imprecation, and looking ridiculously sheepish, thus delivered himself—

"Five pounds, miss! Five devils! If ever I went for to ask five shillings of you, or five fardens, may the hands rot off at my wrists and the teeth drop out of my head. Strike me blind, now, this moment, in this here room, if I'd take so much as a pin's head that you valued, not if my life depended on it and there wasn't no other way of getting a morsel of bread! Look ye here, miss. No offence; I'm but a rough-and-ready chap, and you're a lady. I never come a-nigh one afore. Now I know what they mean when they talk of a real lady, and I see what it is puts such a spirit into them swells as lives with the likes of you. But a rough chap needn't be a blind chap. I come in here for to clean out your jewel-box. I tell ye fair, I don't think as I meant to have ill-treated you, and now I know as I *couldn't* have done it, but I wanted them

gimcracks just the same. If so be as you'd like to see me shopped and lagged, you take and ring that there bell, and look if I go for to move a foot from this blessed spot. There! If so be as you bid me walk out free from that there winder, take and count these here now at once, and see there's not one missing and not one broke. Say the word, miss—which is it to be?"

The reaction was coming on fast. Maud dared not trust her voice, but she pointed to the window with a gesture in which she preserved an admirable imitation of confidence and command. Gentleman Jim threw up the sash, but paused ere he ventured his plunge into the darkness outside.

"Look ye 'ere, miss," he muttered in a hoarse whisper, with one leg over the ledge, "if ever you wants a chap to do you a turn, don't ye forget there's one inside this waistcoat as will take a leap in a halter any day to please ye. You drop a line to 'Gentleman Jim,' at the Sunflower, High Holborn. O! I can read, bless ye, and write and cipher too. What I says I sticks to. No offence, miss. I wonder will I ever see you again?"

He darted back for an instant, much to Maud's dismay, snatched a knot of ribbon which had fallen from her dress on the carpet, and was gone.

She heard his leap on the gravel below, and his cautious footsteps receding towards the park. Then she passed her hands over her face, and looked about her as one who wakes from a dream.

"It was an escape, I suppose," she said, "and I ought to have been horribly frightened; yet I never seemed to lose the upper hand with him for a moment. How odd that even a man like that should be such a fool. No wiser and no cooler than Mr. Ryfe. What is it, I wonder; what is it, and how long will it last?"

"He muttered in a hoarse whisper, with one leg over the ledge."

CHAPTER VI

A REVERSIONARY INTEREST

Although Dorothea could assume on occasions so bright an exterior as I have in a previous chapter endeavoured to describe, her normal state was undoubtedly that which is best conveyed by the epithet "grimy." Old Mr. Bargrave, walking serenely into his office at eleven, and meeting this handmaiden on the stairs, used to wonder how so much dirt could accumulate on the human countenance, when irrigated, as Dorothea's red eyelids too surely testified, by daily tears. Yes, she had gone about her work of late with a heavy heart and a moody brow. Hers was at best a dull dreary life, but in it there grew a noxious weed which she was pleased to cherish for a flower. Well, it was withering every day before her eyes, and all the tears she could shed were not enough to keep it alive. Ah! when the ship is going down under our very feet I don't think it much matters what may be our rank and rating on board. The cook's mate in the galley is no less dismayed than the admiral in command. Dorothea's light, so to speak, was only a tallow-candle, yet to put it out was to leave the poor woman very desolate in the dark. So Mr. Bargrave ventured one morning to ask if she felt quite well; but the snappish manner in which his inquiries were met, as though they masked a load of hidden sarcasm and insult, caused the old gentleman to scuffle into his office with unusual activity, much disturbed and humiliated, while resolved never so to commit himself again.

Into that office we must take the liberty of following him, tenanted as it is only by himself and Tom Ryfe.

The latter, extremely well dressed, wears a posy of spring flowers at his buttonhole, and betrays in his whole bearing that he is under some extraneous influence of an unbusinesslike nature. Bargrave subsides into his leather chair with a grunt, shuffles his papers, dips a pen in the inkstand, and looks over his spectacles at his nephew.

"Waste of time, waste of capital, Tom," says he, with some irritation. "Mind, I washed *my* hands of it from the first. You've been at work now for some months; that's *your* look-out and it's been kept apart and separate from the general business—that's *mine*."

"I've got Tangle's opinion here," answered Tom; "I won't ask you to look at it, uncle. He's dead against us. Just what you said six months back. There's no getting over that trust-deed, nor through it, nor round it, nor any way to the other side of it. I've done *my* d—dest, and we're not a bit better off than when we began."

He spoke in a cheerful, almost an exulting tone, quite unlike a man worsted in a hard and protracted struggle.

"I'm sorry for the young lady," observed Bargrave; "but I never expected anything else. It's a fine estate, and it must go to the male heir. She has but a small settlement, Tom, very inadequate to her position, as I told poor Mr. Bruce many a time. He used to say everything would be set right by his will, and now one of these girls is left penniless, and the other with a pittance, a mere pittance, brought up, as I make no doubt she was, to believe herself an heiress."

"One of them!" exclaimed Tom. "What do you mean?"

"Why, that poor thing who was born a few weeks too soon," answered Bargrave. "She's totally unprovided for. With regard to Miss Bruce, there is a settlement. Two hundred a year, Tom, for life; nothing more. I told you so when you undertook the job. And now who's to pay your costs?"

"Not you, uncle," answered Tom flippantly, "so don't distress yourself on that score."

"I don't, indeed," observed Bargrave, with emphasis.

"You've had your own time to work this, on the understanding, as you know, that it was to be worked at your own risk. I haven't interfered; it was no affair of mine. But your costs will be heavy, Tom, I can't help seeing that. Tangle's opinion don't come so cheap, you see, though it's word for word the same as mine. I would have let *you* have it for nothing, and anybody else for six and eightpence."

"The costs *will* be heavy," answered Tom, still radiant. "I should say a thou. wouldn't cover the amount. Of course, if we can't get them from the estate, they must come out of my pocket."

Bargrave's eyebrows were raised. How the new school went ahead, he thought. Here was this nephew of his talking of a thousand pounds with an indifference verging on contempt. Well, that was Tom's look-out; nevertheless, on such a road it would be wise to establish a halting-place, and his tone betrayed more interest than common while he asked—

"You won't take it into Chancery, Tom, will you?"

The younger man laid his forefinger to the side of his nose, winked thrice with considerable energy, lifted his hat from its peg, adjusted his collars in the glass, nodded to his uncle, muttering briefly, "Back in two hours," and vanished.

Old Bargrave looked after him with a grim, approving smile. "Boy or man," said he aloud, "that chap always knew what he was about. Tom can be safely trusted to take care of Number One."

He was wrong, though, on the present occasion. If Mr. Ryfe did indeed know what he was about, there could be no excuse for the enterprise on which he had embarked. He was selfish. He would not have denied his selfishness, and indeed rather prided himself on that quality; yet behold him now waging a contest in which a man wastes money, time, comfort, and self-respect, that he may wrest from real sorrow and discomfiture the shadow of a happiness which he cannot grasp when he has reached it. There is much wisdom in the opinion expressed by a certain fox concerning grapes hanging out of distance; but it is a wisdom seldom acquired till the limbs are too stiff to

stretch for an effort—till there is scarce a tooth left in the mumbling jaws to be set on edge.

Tom Ryfe had allowed his existence to merge itself in another's. For months, as devotedly as such natures can worship, he had been worshipping his ideal in the person of Miss Bruce. I do not say that he was capable of that highest form of adoration which seeks in the first place the unlimited sovereignty of its idol, and which, as being too good for them, women constantly undervalue; but I do say that he esteemed his fair client the most beautiful, the most attractive, and the most perfect of her sex, resolving that for him she was the only woman in the world, and that in defiance of everything, even her own inclinations, he would win her if he could.

In Holborn there is always a hansom to be got at short notice. "Grosvenor Crescent," says Tom, shutting the half-doors with a bang, and shouting his orders through the little hole in the top. So to Grosvenor Crescent he is forwarded accordingly, at the utmost speed attainable by a pair of high wheels, a well-bred "screw," and a rough-looking driver with a flower in his mouth.

There are several peculiarities, all unreasonable, many ridiculous, attending the demeanour of a man in love. Not the least eccentric of these are his predatory instincts, his tendency to prowl, his preference for walking over other modes of conveyance, and inclination to subterfuge of every kind as to his ultimate destination. Tom Ryfe was going to Belgrave Square; why should he direct his driver to set him down a quarter of a mile off? why overpay the man by a shilling? why wear down the soles of an exceedingly thin and elaborate pair of boots on the hot, hard pavement without compunction? Why? Because he was in love. This was also the reason, no doubt, that he turned red and white when he approached the Square railings; that his nose seemed to swell, his mouth got dry, his hat felt too tight, and the rest of his attire too loose for the occasion; also that he affected an unusual interest in the numbers of the doors, as though meditating a ceremonious morning call, while all the time his heart was under the laburnums in the centre of the Square gardens, at the feet of a haughty, handsome girl,

dressed in half-mourning, with the prettiest black-laced parasol to be found on this side of the Rue Castiglione, for love—of which, indeed, as the gift of Mr. Ryfe, it was a type—or money, which, not having been yet paid for, it could hardly be said to represent.

That heart of his gave a bound when he saw it in her hand as she sailed up the broad gravel-walk to let him in. He was almost happy, poor fellow, for almost a minute, not distressing himself to observe that the colour never deepened a shade on her proud, pale cheek; that the shapely hand, which fitted its pass-key to the lock, was firm as a dentist's, and the clear, cold voice that greeted him far steadier than his own. It is a choice of evils, after all, this favourite game of cross-purposes for two. To care more than the adversary entails worry and vexation; to care less makes a burden of it, and a bore.

"Thank you so much for coming, Miss Bruce—Maud," said Tom passionately. "You never fail, and yet I always dread, somehow, that I shall be disappointed."

"I keep my word, Mr. Ryfe," answered the young lady, with perfect self-possession; "and I am quite as anxious as you can be, I assure you. I want so to know how we are getting on."

He showed less discouragement than might have been expected. Perhaps he was used to the *sang-froid*, perhaps he rather liked it, believing it, in his ignorance, a distinctive mark of class, not knowing—how should he?—that, once excited, these thoroughbred ones are, of all racers, the least amenable to restraint.

"I have bad news," he said tenderly. "Miss Bruce, I hardly like to tell you that I fear we cannot make out case enough to come into court. I took the opinion of the first man we have. I am sorry to say he gives it against us. I am not selfish," he added, with real emotion, "and I am sorry indeed, for your sake, dearest Miss Bruce."

He meant to have called her "Maud"; but the beautiful lips tightened, and the delicate eyebrows came down very straight and stern over the deep eyes in which he had learned to read his fate. He would wait for a better opportunity, he thought, of using the dear, familiar name.

She took small notice of his trouble.

"Has there been no mismanagement?" she asked, almost angrily; "no papers lost? no foul play? Have you done your best?"

"I have, indeed," he answered meekly. "After all, is it not for my own interest as much as yours? Are they not henceforth to be in common?"

She ignored the question altogether; she seemed to be thinking of something else. While they paced up and down a walk screened from the Square windows by trees and shrubs already clothed in the tender, quivering foliage of spring, she kept silence for several seconds, looking straight before her with a sterner expression than he could yet remember to have seen on the face he adored. Presently she spoke in a hard, determined voice—

"I *am* disappointed. Yes, Mr. Ryfe, I don't mind owning I am bitterly and grievously disappointed. There, I suppose it's not your fault, so you needn't look black about it; and I dare say you did the best you could afford at the price. Well, I don't want to hurt your feelings—your *very* best, then. And yet it seems very odd—you were so confident at first. Of course if the thing's really gone, and there's no chance left, it's folly to think about it. But what a future to lose—what a future to lose! Mr. Ryfe, I can't stay with Aunt Agatha—I can't and I won't! How she could ever find anybody to marry her! Mr. Ryfe, speak to me. What had I better do?"

Tom would have given a round sum of money at that moment to recall one of the many imaginary conversations held with Miss Bruce, in which he had exhausted poetry, sentiment, and forensic ardour for the successful pleading of his suit. Now he could find nothing better to say than that "he had hoped she was comfortable with Mrs. Stanmore; and anybody who didn't make Miss Bruce comfortable must be brutal and wicked. But—but—if it was really so—and she could be persuaded—why, Miss Bruce must long have known——" And here the voice of Tom, the plausible, the prudent, the self-reliant, degenerated to a husky whisper, because he felt that his very heart was mounting to his throat.

Miss Bruce cut him exceedingly short.

"You remember our bargain," she said bitterly. "If

you don't, I can remind you of it. Listen, Mr. Ryfe; I am not going to cheat you out of your dues. You were to win back my fortune from the next of kin—this cousin who seems to have law on his side. You charged yourself with the trouble—that counts for nothing, it is in the way of your business—with the costs—the expenses—I don't know what you call them—these were to be paid out of the estate. It was all plain sailing, if we had conquered; and there was an alternative in the event of failure. I accepted it. But I tell you, not till every stratagem has been tried, every stone turned, every resource exhausted, do I acknowledge the defeat, nor—I speak plain English, Mr. Ryfe—do I pay the penalty."

He turned very pale. "You did not use this tone when we walked together through the snow in the avenue at Ecclesfield. You promised of your own accord, you know you did," said poor Tom, trembling all over; "and I have got your promise in writing locked up in a tin box at home."

She laughed a hard, shrill laugh, not without some real humour in it, at his obvious distress.

"Keep it safe in your tin box," said she, "and don't be afraid, when the time comes, that I shall throw you over. Ah! what an odd thing money is; and how it seems able to do everything!" She was looking miles away now, totally unconscious of her companion's presence. "To me this five or six thousand a year represents hope, enjoyment, position—all that makes life worth having. More, to lose it is to lose my freedom, to lose all that makes life endurable!"

"And you *have* lost it," observed Tom doggedly. He was very brave, very high-minded, very chivalrous in any way; but he possessed the truly British quality of tenacity, and did not mean to be shaken off by any feminine vagaries where once he had taken hold.

"Et je payerais de ma personne," replied Miss Bruce scornfully. "I don't suppose you know any French. You must go now, Mr. Ryfe; my maid's coming back for me from the bonnet-shop. I can't be trusted, you see, over fifty yards of pavement and a crossing by myself. The maid is walking with me now behind these lilac-

bushes, you know. Her name is Ryfe. She is very cross and silent; she wears a well-made coat, shiny boots, rather a good hat, and carries a nosegay as big as a chimney-sweep's—you can give it me if you like—I dare say you bought it on purpose."

How she could twist and turn him at will! three or four playful words like these, precious all the more that her general manner was so haughty and reserved, caused Tom to forget her pride, her whims, her various caprices, her too palpable indifference to himself. He offered the flowers with humble gratitude, ignoring resolutely the presumption that she would probably throw them away before she reached her own door.

"Good-bye, Miss Bruce," said he, bowing reverently over the slim hand she vouchsafed him, and "Good-bye," echoed the young lady, adding, with another of those hard little laughs that jarred so on Tom's nerves, "Come with better news next time, and don't give in while there's a chance left; depend upon it the money's better worth having than the client. By the bye, I sent you a card for Lady Goldthred's this afternoon—only a stupid breakfast—did you forget it?"

"Are you going?" returned Tom, with the clouds clearing from his brow.

"Perhaps we shall, if it's fine," was the reply. "And now I can't wait any longer. Don't forget what I told you, and do the best you can."

So Tom Ryfe departed from his garden of Eden with sundry misgivings not entirely new to him, that the fruit he took such pains to ripen for his own gathering might but be gaudy wax-work after all, or painted stone, perhaps, cold, smooth, and beautiful, against which he should rasp his teeth in vain.

The well-tutored Puckers, dressed in faded splendour, and holding a brown-paper parcel in her hand, was waiting for her young lady at the corner of the Square.

While thus engaged she witnessed a bargain, of an unusual nature, made apparently under extraordinary pressure of circumstances. A ragged boy, established at the crossing, who had indeed rendered himself conspicuous by his endeavours to ferry Puckers over dry-shod, was accosted

by a shabby-genteel and remarkably good-looking man in the following vernacular—

"On this minnit, off at six, Buster; two bob an' a bender, and a three of eye-water, in?"

"Done for another joey," replied Buster, with the premature acuteness of youth foraging for itself in the streets of London.

"Done," repeated the man, pulling a handful of silver from his pocket, and assuming the broom at once to enter on his professional labours, ere Puckers had recovered from her astonishment, or Buster could vanish round the corner in the direction of a neighbouring mews.

Though plying his instrument diligently, the man kept a sharp eye on the Square gardens. When Tom Ryfe emerged through the heavy iron gate he whispered a deep and horrible curse, but his dark eyes shone and his whole face beamed into a ruffianly kind of beauty, when after a discreet pause, Miss Bruce followed the young lawyer through the same portal. Then the man went to work with his broom harder than ever. Not Sir Walter Raleigh spreading his cloak at the feet of his sovereign mistress lest they should take a speck of mud could have shown more loyalty, more devotion, than did Gentleman Jim sweeping for bare life, as Miss Bruce and her maid approached the crossing he had hired for the occasion.

Maud recognised him at a glance. Not easily startled or surprised, she bade Puckers walk on, while she took a half-crown from her purse and put it in the sweeper's hand.

"At least it is an honest trade," said she, looking him fixedly in the face.

The man turned pale while he received her bounty.

"It's not that, miss," he stammered. "It's not that—I only wanted to get a look of ye. I only wanted just to hear the turn of your voice again. No offence, miss, I'll go away now. O! can't ye give a chap a job? It's my heart's blood as I'd shed for you, free—and never ask no more nor a kind word in return!"

She looked him over from head to foot once more and passed on. In that look there was neither surprise, nor indignation, nor scorn, only a quaint and somewhat amused

curiosity, yet this thief and associate of thieves quivered, as if it had been a sun-stroke. When she passed out of sight he bit the half-crown till it bent, and hid it away in his breast. "I'll never part with ye," said he, "never;" unmindful of poor Dorothea, going about her work tearful and forlorn. Gentleman Jim, uneducated, besotted, half-brutalised as he was, had yet drunk from the cup that poisons equally the basest and noblest of our kind. A well-dressed, good-looking young man, walking on the other side of the Square, did not fail to witness Tom Ryfe's farewell and Maud's interview with the crossing-sweeper. He too looked strangely disturbed, pacing up and down an adjoining street, more than once, before he could make up his mind to ring a well-known bell. Verily Miss Bruce seemed to be one of those ladies whose destiny it is to puzzle, worry, and interest every man with whom they come in contact.

CHAPTER VII

DICK STANMORE

She had certainly succeeded in puzzling Dick Stanmore and already began to interest him. The worry would surely follow in due time. Dick was a fine subject for the scalpel—good-humoured, generous, single-hearted, with faultless digestive powers, teeth, and colour to correspond, a strong tendency to active exercise, and such a faculty of enjoyment as, except in the highest order of intellects, seldom lasts a man over thirty.

Like many of his kind, he *said* he hated London, but lived there very contentedly from April to July, nevertheless. He was fresh, just at present, from a good scenting season in Leicestershire, followed by a sojourn on the Tweed, in which classical river he had improved many shining hours, wading waist-deep under a twenty-foot rod, any number of yards of line, and a fly of various hues, as gaudy, and but little smaller than a cock pheasant. Now he had been a week in town, during which period he met Miss Bruce at least once every day. This constant intercourse is to be explained in a few words.

Mrs. Stanmore, the Aunt Agatha with whom Maud expressed herself so unwilling to reside, was a sister of the late Mr. Bruce. She had married a widower with one son, that widower being old Mr. Stanmore, defunct, that son being Dick. Mrs. Stanmore, in the enjoyment of a large jointure (which rather impoverished her step-son), though arbitrary and unpleasant, was a woman of generous instincts, so offered Maud a home the moment she learned

her niece's double bereavement; which home, for many reasons, heiress or no heiress, Miss Bruce felt constrained to accept. Thus it came about that she found herself walking with Tom Ryfe *en cachette* in the Square gardens; and, leaving them, recognised the gentleman whom she was to meet at luncheon in ten minutes, on whose intellect at least, if not his heart, she felt pretty sure she had already made an impression.

"I won't show her up," said Dick to his neatest boots, while he scraped them at his mother's door, "but I *should* like to know who that bumptious-looking chap is, and what the h—ll she could have to say to him in the Square gardens all the same."

Mr. Stanmore's language at the luncheon-table, it is needless to say, was far less emphatic than that which relieved his feelings in soliloquy; nor was he to-day quite so talkative as usual. His mother thought him silent (he always called her "mother," and, to do her justice, she could not have loved her own son better, nor scolded him oftener, had she possessed one); Miss Bruce voted him stupid and sulky. She told him so.

"A merrythought, if you please, and no bread-sauce," said the young lady, in her calm, imperious manner. "Don't forget I hate bread-sauce, if you mean to come here often to luncheon; and do *say* something. Aunt Agatha can't, no more can I. Recollect we've got a heavy afternoon before us."

Aunt Agatha always contradicted. "Not heavier than any other breakfast, Maud," said she severely. "You didn't think that tea at the Tower heavy last week, nor the ghosts in the mess-room of the Blues. Lady Goldthred's an old friend of mine, and it was very kind of her to ask us. Besides, Dick's coming down in the barouche."

Maud's face brightened, and be sure, Dick saw it brighten.

"That accounts for it," said she, with the rare smile in her eyes; "and he thinks we sha'n't let him smoke, so he sulks beforehand, grim, grave, and silent as a ghost. Mr. Stanmore, cheer up. You may smoke the whole way down. *I'll* give you leave."

"Nonsense, my dear," observed Aunt Agatha sternly.

"He don't want to do anything of the kind. What have you been about, Maud, all the morning? I looked for you everywhere to help me with the visiting-list."

"Puckers and I took a 'constitutional,'" answered Miss Bruce unblushingly. "We wanted to do some shopping." But her dark eyes stole towards Dick, and, although his never met them, she felt satisfied he had witnessed her interview with Tom Ryfe in the Square gardens.

"I saw you both coming in, Miss Bruce," said Dick, breaking the awkward pause which succeeded Maud's mis-statement. "I think Puckers wears twice as smart a bonnet as yours. I hope you are not offended."

Again that smile from the dark eyes. Dick felt, and perhaps she meant him to feel, that he had lost nothing in her good opinion by ignoring even to herself that which she wished to keep unknown.

"I think you've very little taste in bonnets, whatever you may have in faces," answered the young lady; "and I think I shall go and put one on now that will make you eat your words humbly when I appear in it on the lawn at Lady Goldthred's."

"I have no doubt there won't be a dry eye in the place," answered Dick, looking after her, as she left the room, with undisguised admiration in his honest face—with something warmer and sweeter than admiration creeping and gathering about his heart.

So they all went down together in the barouche, Dick sitting with his back to the horses, and gazing his fill on the young beauty opposite, looking so cool and fair in her fresh summer draperies, so thoroughly in keeping with the light and sparkle of everything around—the brilliant sunshine, the spring foliage, the varying scenery, even to the varnish and glitter of the well-appointed carriage, and the plated harness on the horses.

Aunt Agatha conversed but sparingly. She was occupied with the phantom pages of her banker's book; with the shortcomings of a new housemaid; not a little with the vague sketch of a dress, to be worn at certain approaching gaieties, which should embody the majesty of the chaperon without entirely resigning all pretensions to youth. But for one remark, "that the coachman was

driving very badly," I think she travelled in stately silence as far as Kew. Not so the other occupants of the barouche. Maud, desirous of forgetting much that was distasteful to her in the events of the morning, and indeed, in the course of her daily life, resolved to accept the tangible advantages of the present, nor scrupled to show that she enjoyed fresh air, fine weather, and pleasant company. Dick, stimulated by her presence, and never disinclined to gaiety of spirit, exerted himself to be agreeable, pouring forth a continuous stream of that pleasant nonsense which is the only style of conversation endurable in the process of riding, driving, or other jerking means of locomotion.

It is only when his suit has prospered that a man feels utterly idiotic and moonstruck in the presence of the woman he adores. Why, when life is scarce endurable but at her side, he should become a bore in her presence, is only another intricacy in the many puzzles that constitute the labyrinth of love. So long as he flutters unsinged about its flame, the moth is all the happier for the warmth of the candle, all the livelier for the inspiration of its rays. Dick Stanmore, turning into the Kensington Road, was the insect basking in those bright, alluring beams; but Dick Stanmore on the farther side of Kew felt more like the same insect when its wings have been already shrivelled and its powers of flight destroyed in the temerity of its adoration.

Still it was pleasant, very pleasant. She looked so beautiful, she smiled so kindly, always with her eyes, sometimes with the perfect, high-bred mouth; she entered so gaily into his gossip, his fancies, his jokes, allowing him to hold her parasol and arrange her shawls with such sweetness and good-humour, that Dick felt quite sorry to reach the Portugal laurels and trim lawns of their destination, when the drive was over from which he had derived this new and unforeseen gratification. Something warned him that, in accordance with that rule of compensation which governs all terrestrial matters, these delights were too keen to last, and there must surely be annoyance and vexation in store to complete the afternoon.

His first twinge originated in the marked admiration called forth by Miss Bruce's appearance at the very outset.

She had scarcely made her salaam to Lady Goldthred, and passed on through billiard-room, library, and verandah, to the two dwarfed larches and half-acre of mown grass which constitute the wilderness of a suburban villa, ere Dick felt conscious that his could be no monopoly of adoration. Free trade was at once declared by glances, whispers and inquiries from a succession of well-dressed young gentlemen, wise doubtless in their own conceit, yet not wanting in that worldly temerity which impels fools to rush in where angels fear to tread, and gives the former class of beings, in their dealings with that sex which is compounded of both, an immeasurable advantage over the latter.

Miss Bruce had not traversed the archery-ground twenty-five feet, from target to target, on her way to the refreshment-tent, ere half-a-dozen of the household troops, a bachelor baronet, and the richest young commoner of his year were presented by her host, at their own earnest request. Dick's high spirits went down like the froth in a glass of soda-water, and he fell back discouraged, to exchange civilities with Lady Goldthred.

That excellent woman, dressed, painted, and wound-up for the occasion, was volubly delighted with everybody; and being by no means sure of Dick's identity, dashed the more cordiality into her manner, while careful not to commit herself by venturing on his name.

"*So* good of you to come," she fired it at him as she had fired it at fifty others, "all this distance from town, and such a hot day, to see my poor little place. But isn't it pretty now? And are we not lucky in the weather? And weren't you smothered in dust coming down? And you've brought *the* beauty with you too. I declare Sir Moses is positively smitten. I'm getting quite jealous. Just look at him now. But he's not the only one, that's a comfort."

Dick *did* look, wondering vaguely why the sunshine should have faded all at once. Sir Moses, a little bald personage, in a good-humoured fuss, whom no amount of inexperience could have taken for anything but the "man of the house," was paying the utmost attention to Miss Bruce, bringing her tea, placing a camp-stool for her that she might see the archery, and rendering her generally

those hospitable services which it had been his lot to waste on many less attractive objects during that long sunny afternoon.

"Sir Moses is always so kind," answered Dick vaguely, "and nobody's breakfasts are so pleasant as yours, Lady Goldthred."

"I'm *too* glad you think so," answered his hostess, who, like a good-hearted woman as she was, took enormous pains with these festivities, congratulating herself, when she washed off her rouge, and doffed her robes of ceremony at night, that she had got through the great penance of her year. "You're always so good-natured. But I *do* think men like to come here. The country air, you know, and the scenery, and plenty of pretty people. Now, there's Lord Bearwarden—look, he's talking to Miss Bruce, under the cedar—he's actually driven over from Windsor, and though he's a way of being so fine and *blasé* and all that, he don't look much bored at this moment, does he? Twenty thousand a year, they say, and been everywhere and done everything. Now, I fancy, he wants to marry, for he's much older, you know, than he looks. To hear him talk, you'd think he was a hundred, and broken-hearted into the bargain. For my part, I've no patience with a melancholy man; but then I'm not a young lady. You know him, though, of course?"

Dick's reply, if he made one, was drowned in a burst of brass music that deafened people at intervals throughout the afternoon, and Lady Goldthred's attention wandered to fresh arrivals, for whom, with fresh smiles and untiring energy, she elaborated many more remarks of a similar tendency.

Dick Stanmore *did* know Lord Bearwarden, as every man about London knows every other man leading the same profitable life. There were many whom he would have preferred as rivals; but thinking he detected signs of weariness on Maud's face (it had already come to this, that he studied her countenance, and winced to see it smile on any one else), he crossed the lawn, that he might fill the place by her side, to which he considered himself as well entitled as another.

His progress took some little time, what with bowing

to one lady, treading on the dress of another, and parrying the attack of a third who wanted him to give her daughter a cup of tea; so that by the time Dick reached her Lord Bearwarden had left Miss Bruce to the attentions of another guest, more smart than gentlemanlike, in whose appearance there was something indefinably out of keeping with the rest. Dick started. It was the man with whom he had seen Maud walking before luncheon in the Square.

People were pairing for a dance on the lawn, and Mr. Stanmore, wedged in by blocks of beauty and mountains of muslin, could neither advance nor retreat. It was no fault of his that he overheard Miss Bruce's conversation with the stranger.

"*Will* you dance with me?" said the latter, in a whisper of suppressed anger, rather than the tone of loving entreaty with which it is customary to urge this pleasant request.

"Impossible!" answered Maud energetically. "I'm engaged to Lord Bearwarden—it's the Lancers, and he's only gone to make up the set."

The man ground his teeth and knit his brows.

"You seem to forget," he muttered—"you carry it off with too high a hand. I have a right to bid you dance with me. I have a right, if I chose, to order you down to the river there and row you back to Putney with the tide; and I *will*, I swear, if you provoke me too far."

She seemed to keep her temper with an effort.

"*Do* be patient," she whispered, glancing round at the bystanders. "Surely you can trust me. Hush! here comes Lord Bearwarden."

And taking that nobleman's arm, she walked off with a mournful pleading look at her late companion, which poor Dick Stanmore would have given worlds to have seen directed to himself.

There was no more pleasure for him now during the rest of the entertainment. He did indeed obtain a momentary distraction from his resolution to ascertain the name of the person who had so spoilt his afternoon. It helped him very little to be told the gentleman was "a Mr. Ryfe." Nobody seemed to know any more, and even

this information he extracted with difficulty from Lady Goldthred, who added, in a tone of astonishment—

"Why, you brought him, didn't you?"

Dick was mystified—worse, he was unhappy. For a few minutes he wandered about behind the dancers, watching Maud and her partner as they threaded the intricacies of those exceedingly puzzling evolutions which constitute the Lancer quadrilles. Lord Bearwarden was obviously delighted with Maud, and that young lady seemed by no means unconscious or careless of her partner's approval. I do not myself consider the measure they were engaged in threading as particularly conducive to the interchange of sentiment. If my memory serves me right, this complicated dance demands as close an attention as whist, and affords almost as few opportunities of communicating with a partner. Nevertheless, there is a language of the eyes, as of the lips; and it was not Lord Bearwarden's fault if his looks were misunderstood by their object. All this Dick saw, and seeing, grew more and more disgusted with life in general, with Lady Goldthred's breakfast in particular. When the dance ended, and Dick Stanmore—hovering about his flame, like the poor moth to which I have compared him, once singed and eager to be singed again—was hesitating as to whether he, too, should not go boldly in and try his chance, behold Mr. Ryfe, with an offensive air of appropriation, walks off with Miss Bruce arm-in-arm, towards the sequestered path that leads to the garden-gate, that leads to the shady lane, that leads to the shining river!

It was all labour and sorrow now. People who called this sort of thing amusement, thought Dick, would go to purgatory for pastime, and a stage farther for diversion. When he broke poor Redwing's back three fields from home in the Melton steeplechase he was grieved, annoyed, distressed. When he lost that eleven-pounder in the shallows below Melrose, because "Aundry," his Scottish henchman, was too drunk to keep his legs in a running stream, he was angry, vexed, disgusted; but never before, in his whole life of amusement and adventure, had he experienced anything like the combination of uncomfortable feelings that oppressed him now. He was ashamed

of his own weakness, too, all the time, which only made matters worse.

"Hang it!" thought Dick, "I don't see why I should punish myself by staying here any longer. I'll tell my mother I must be back in London to dinner, make my bow, jump into a boat, and scull down to Chelsea. So I will. The scull will do me good, and if—if she *has* gone on the water with that snob, why I shall know the worst. What a strange, odd girl she is! And O, how I wish she wasn't!"

But it takes time to find a lady, even of Mrs. Stanmore's presence, amongst five hundred of her kind jostled up in half-an-acre of ground; neither will the present code of good manners, liberal as it is, bear a guest out in walking up to his hostess *à bout portant*, to interrupt her in an interesting conversation, by bidding her a solemn good-bye hours before anybody else has begun to move. Twenty minutes at least must have elapsed ere Dick found himself in a dainty outrigger with a long pair of sculls, fairly launched on the bosom of the Thames—more than time for the corsair, if corsair he should be, to have sailed far out of sight with false, consenting Maud in the direction of London Bridge.

Dick was no mean waterman. The exercise of a favourite art, combining skill with muscular effort, is conducive to peace of mind. A swim, a row, a gallop over a country, a fencing-bout or a rattling set-to with "the gloves" bring a man to his senses more effectually than whole hours of quiescent reflection. Ere the perspiration stood on Dick Stanmore's brow, he suspected he had been hasty and unjust; by the time he caught his second wind, and had got fairly into swing, he was in charity with all the world, reflecting, not without toleration and self-excuse, that he had been an ass.

So he sculled on, like a jolly young waterman, making capital way with the tide, and calculating that if the fugitive pair should have done anything so improbable as to take the water in company, he must have overhauled, or at least sighted them, ere now.

His spirits rose. He wondered why he should have been so desponding an hour ago. He had made excuses

for himself—he began to make them for Maud, nay, he was fast returning to his allegiance, the allegiance of a day, thrown off in five minutes, when he sustained another damper, such as the total reversal of his outrigger and his own immersion, head uppermost, in the Thames, could not have surpassed.

At a bend of the river near Putney he came suddenly on one of those lovely little retreats which fringe its banks—a red-brick house, a pretty flower-garden, a trim lawn, shaded by weeping-willows, kissing the water's edge. On that lawn, under those weeping-willows, he descried the graceful, pliant figure, the raven hair, the imperious gestures that had made such havoc with his heart, and muttering the dear name, never before coupled with a curse, he knew for the first time, by the pain, how fondly he already loved this wild, heedless, heartless girl, who had come to live in his mother's house. Swinging steadily along in mid-stream, he must have been too far off, he thought, for her to recognise his features; yet why should she have taken refuge in the house with such haste, at an open window, through which a pair of legs clad in trousers denoted the presence of some male companion? For a moment he turned sick and faint, as he resigned himself to the torturing truth. This Mr. Ryfe, then, had been as good as his word, and she, his own proud, refined, beautiful idol, had committed the enormity of accompanying that imperious admirer down here. What could be the secret of such a man's influence over such a girl? Whatever it was, she must be Dick's idol no longer. And he would have loved her so dearly!—so dearly!

There were tears in the eyes of this jolly young waterman as he pulled on. These things hurt, you see, while the heart is fresh and honest, and has been hitherto untouched. Those should expect rubbers who play at bowls; if people pull their own chestnuts out of the fire they must compound for burnt fingers; and when you wager a living, loving, trustful heart against an organ of wax, gutta-percha, or Aberdeen granite, don't be surprised if you get the worst of the game all through.

He had quite given her up by the time he arrived at Chelsea, and had settled in his own mind that hencefor-

ward there must be no more sentiment, no more sunshine, no more romance. He had dreamt his dream. Well for him it was so soon over. *Semel insanivimus omnes.* Fellows had all been fools once, but no woman should ever make a fool of him again! No woman ever *could.* He should never see another like *her!*

Perhaps this was the reason he walked half-a-mile out of his homeward way, through Belgrave Square, to haunt the street in which she lived, looking wistfully into those gardens whence he had seen her emerge that very day with her mysterious companion—gazing with plaintive interest on the bell-handle and door-scraper of his mother's house—vaguely pondering how he could ever bear to enter that house again—and going through the whole series of those imaginary throes, which are indeed real sufferings with people who have been foolish enough to exchange the dignity and reality of existence for a dream.

What he expected I am at a loss to explain; but although, while pacing up and down the street, he vowed every turn should be the last, he had completed his nineteenth, and was on the eve of commencing his twentieth, when Mrs. Stanmore's carriage rolled up to the door, stopping with a jerk, to discharge itself of that lady and Maud, looking cool, fresh, and unrumpled as when they started. The revulsion of feeling was almost too much for Dick. By instinct, rather than with intention, he came forward to help them out, so confused in his ideas that he failed to remark how entirely his rapid retreat from the breakfast had been overlooked. Mrs. Stanmore seemed never to have missed him. Maud greeted him with a merry laugh, denoting more of good-humour and satisfaction than should have been compatible with keen interest in his movements or justifiable pique at his desertion.

"Why, here you are!" she exclaimed gaily. "Actually home before us, like a dog that one takes out walking to try and lose. Poor thing! did it run all the way under the carriage with its tongue out? and wasn't it choked with dust, and isn't it tired and thirsty? and won't it come in and have some tea?"

What could Dick say or do? He followed her up-stairs to the back drawing-room, meek and submissive as the

dog to which she had likened him, waiting for her there with a dry mouth and a beating heart while she went to "take off her things"; and when she reappeared smiling and beautiful, able only to propound the following ridiculous question with a gasp—

"Didn't you go on the water then, after all?"

"On the water!" she repeated. "Not I. Nothing half so pleasant, I assure you. I wish we had! for anything so slow as the whole performance on dry land, I never yet experienced. I danced five dances, none of them nice ones—I hate dancing on turf—and I had a warm-water ice and some jelly that tasted of bees'-wax. What became of you? We couldn't find you anywhere to get the carriage. However, I asked Aunt Agatha to come away directly somebody made a move, because I was cross and tired and bored with the whole business. I think she liked it much better than I did; but here she is to answer for herself."

Dick had no dinner that day, yet what a pleasant cigar it was he smoked as he coasted Belgrave Square once more in the sweet spring evening under the gas-lamps! He had been very unhappy in the afternoon, but that was all over now. Anxiety, suspicion, jealousy, and the worst ingredient of the latter, a sense of humiliation, had made wild work with his spirits, his temper, and indeed his appetite; yet twenty minutes in a dusky back drawing-room, a cup of weak tea and a slice of inferior bread-and-butter, were enough to restore self-respect, peace of mind, and vigour of digestion. He could not recall one word that bore an unusually favourable meaning, one look that might not have been directed to a brother or an intimate friend, and still he felt buoyed up with hope, restored to happiness. The reaction had come on, and he was more in love with her than ever.

CHAPTER VIII

NINA

It might have spared Mr. Stanmore a deal of unnecessary discomfort had the owner of those legs which he saw through the open window at Putney thought fit to show the rest of his person to voyagers on the river. Dick would then have recognised an old college friend, would have landed to greet him with the old college heartiness, and in the natural course of events would have satisfied himself that his suspicions of Maud were unfounded and absurd.

Simon Perkins is not a romantic name, nor did the exterior of Simon Perkins, as seen either within or without the Putney cottage, correspond with that which fiction assigns to a hero of romance. His frame was small and slight, his complexion pale, his hair weak and thin, his manner diffident, awkward, almost ungainly, but that its thorough courtesy and good-nature were so obvious and unaffected. In general society people passed him over as a shy, harmless, unmeaning little man; but those who really knew him affirmed that his courage was not to be damped, nor his nerve shaken, by extremity of danger—that he was always ready with succour for the needy, with sympathy for the sorrowful. In short, as they tersely put it, that "his heart was in the right place."

For half-a-dozen terms at Oxford he and Dick had been inseparable. Their intimacy, none the less close for dissimilarity of tastes and pursuits, since Perkins was a reading man, and Dick a "fast" one, had been still more firmly soldered by a long vacation spent together in Norway,

and a "thrilling tableau," as Dick called it, to which their expedition gave rise. Had Simon Perkins's heart been no stouter than his slender person, his companion must have died a damp death, and this story would never have been told.

The young men were in one of the most picturesque parts of that wild and beautiful country, created, as it would seem, for the express gratification of the fisherman and the landscape painter; Simon Perkins, an artist in his very soul, wholly engrossed by the sketch of a mountain, Dick Stanmore equally absorbed in fishing a pool. Scarce twenty yards apart, neither was conscious, for the moment, of the other's existence; Simon, indeed, being in spirit some seven thousand feet above the level of the sea, putting more ochre into the virgin snow that crested his topmost peak, and Dick deftly dropping a fly, the size of a pen-wiper, over the nose of a fifteen-pounder that had already once risen to the gaudy lure.

Poising himself, like a Mercury, on a rock in mid-stream, the angler had just thrown eighteen yards of line lightly as a silken thread to an inch, when his foot slipped, and a loud splash, bringing the painter, like Icarus, out of the clouds with a run, startled his attention to the place where his companion was not. In another second Simon had his grip on Dick's collar, and both men were struggling for dear life in the pool. Stanmore could swim, of course, but it takes a good swimmer to hold his own in fisherman's boots, encumbered, moreover, with sundry paraphernalia of his art. Simon was a very mild performer in the water, but he had coolness, presence of mind, and inflexible tenacity of purpose. To these qualities the friends owed it that they ever reached the shore alive. It was a very near thing, and when they found their legs and looked into each other's faces, gasping, dripping, spouting water from ears, nose, and mouth, Dick gathered breath to exclaim, "You trump! I should have been drowned, to a moral!" Whereat the other, choking, coughing, and sputtering, answered faintly, "You old muff! I believe we were never out of our depth the whole time!"

Perkins did not go up for his degree, and the men lost

sight of one another in a few years, cherishing, indeed, a kindly remembrance each of his friend, yet taking little pains to refresh that remembrance by renewed intercourse. How many intimacies, how many attachments outlast a twelvemonth's break? There are certain things people go on caring for, but I fear they are more intimately connected with self in daily life than either the romance of friendship or the intermittent fever of love. The enjoyment of luxury, the pursuit of money-making, seem to lose none of their zest with advancing years, and perhaps to these we may add the taste for art.

Now to Simon Perkins art was as the very air he breathed. The greatest painter was, in his eyes, the greatest man that lived. When he left Oxford, he devoted himself to the profession of painting with such success as rendered him independent, besides enabling him to contribute largely to the comfort of two maiden aunts with whom he lived.

Not without hard work; far from it. There is no pursuit, perhaps, which demands such constant and unremitting exertion from its votaries. The ideal to which he strains can never be reached, for his very successes keep building it yet higher, and a painter is so far like a baby his whole life through that he is always learning to *see*.

Simon was still learning to see on the afternoon Dick Stanmore sculled by his cottage windows—studying the effect of a declining sun on the opposite elms, not entirely averting his looks from that graceful girl, who ran into the house to the oarsman's discomfiture, and missing her more than might have been expected when she vanished up-stairs. Was not the sun still shining bright on that graceful feathery foliage? He did not quite think it was.

Presently there came to the door a rustle of draperies, and an elderly lady, not remarkable for beauty, entered the room. Taking no notice of Simon, she proceeded to arrange small articles of furniture with a restless manner that denoted anxiety of mind. At last, stopping short in the act of dusting a china tea-cup, with a very clean cambric handkerchief, she observed, in a faltering voice, "Simon, dear, I feel so nervous I know I shall never get through with it. Where's your Aunt Jemima?"

Even while she spoke there appeared at the door another lady, somewhat more elderly, and even less remarkable for beauty, who seated herself bolt upright in an elbow-chair without delay, and, looking austerely round, observed in an impressive voice, "Susannah, fetch me my spectacles; Simon, shut the door."

Of all governments there must be a head. It was obvious that in this deliberative assembly Miss Jemima Perkins assumed the lead. Both commands being promptly obeyed, she pulled her spectacles from their case and put them on, as symbols of authority, forthwith.

"I want your advice, Simon," said this strong-minded old lady, in a hard, clear voice. "I dare say I sha'n't act upon it, but I want it all the same. I've no secrets from either of you; but as the head of the family I don't mean to shirk responsibility, and my opinion is, she must go. Susannah, no weakness. My dear, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Nina, run up-stairs again, we don't want you just now."

This to a pretty head with raven hair, that popped saucily in, and as saucily withdrew.

Simon looked wistfully after the pretty head, and relapsed into a day-dream. Was he thinking what a picture it would make, or what a reality it was? His aunt's voice recalled him to facts.

"Simon," she repeated, "my opinion is she must go."

"Go!" said her nephew vacantly, "what do you mean, aunt?—Go?—where?—who?"

"Why that girl we're all so fond of," replied Miss Jemima, growing every moment more severe. "Mr. Algernon used to come here twice every quarter, usedn't he? Never missed the day, did he? and paid his money as regular as clockwork. Susannah, how long is it since he's been to see us?"

Susannah sobbed.

"That's no answer," pursued the inflexible speaker. "To-morrow week it will be ten months since we have seen him; and to-morrow week it will be ten months since we've had a scrap of his handwriting. Is that girl to remain here, dependent on the bounty of a struggling artist and two old maids? My opinion is that she ought

to go out and gain her own livelihood; my feeling is that —that—I couldn't bear to think of the poor dear in any home but this."

Here the old lady, whose assumption of extreme fortitude had been gradually leading to the inevitable catastrophe, broke down altogether, while Susannah, giving rein to her emotions, lifted up her voice and wept.

"You knew who she was all along, Jemima," said the latter, gulping sadly at her syllables: "you know you did; and it's cruel to harrow up our feelings like this."

Simon said nothing, but on his homely features gathered an expression of resolve, through which there gleamed the bright radiance of hope.

Miss Perkins wiped her eyes and then her spectacles. Resuming her dignity, she proceeded in a calmer voice—

"I will not conceal from you, Susannah, nor from you, Simon, that I have had my suspicions for several years. Those suspicions became a certainty some time ago. There can be no doubt now of the relationship existing between our Nina and the Mr. Algernon, as he called himself, who took such an interest in the child's welfare. When I saw Mr. Bruce's death in the paper, I knew that our pet had lost her father. What was I to do? When I consented to take charge of the child twenty years ago—and a sweet pretty babe she was—I perfectly understood there must be a mystery connected with her birth. As head of the family, I imparted my suspicions to neither of you, and I kept my conjectures and my disapproval to myself. This seemed only fair to my correspondent, only fair to the child. When I learned Mr. Bruce's death, it came upon me like a shot, that he was the Mr. Algernon who used to visit here, and who furnished such liberal means for the support and education of that girl up-stairs—Susannah, I cannot make myself understood if you will persist in blowing your nose!—Since Mr. Bruce's death no Mr. Algernon has darkened our doors, no remittances have come to hand with the usual signature. Simon, my impression is that no provision whatever has been made for the poor thing, and that our Nina is—is utterly destitute and friendless."

Here Miss Susannah gave a little scream, whereat her

sister glared austerely, and resumed the spectacles she had taken off to dry.

"Not friendless, aunt," exclaimed Simon, in a great heat and fuss; "never friendless so long as we are all above ground. I am perfectly willing to—stay, Aunt Jemima, I beg your pardon, what do you think ought to be done?"

The old lady smoothed her dress, looking round with placid dignity.

"I will first hear what you two have to propose. Susannah, leave off crying this minute, and tell us what you think of this—this *very* embarrassing position."

It is possible that but for the formidable adjective Susannah might have originated, and indeed expressed some idea of her own; but to confront a position described by her sister as "embarrassing" was quite beyond her powers, and she could only repeat feebly, "I'll give her half my money—I'll give her half my money. We can't drive her out into the cold." This with sobs and tears, and a hand pressed helplessly to her side.

Miss Jemima turned from her with contempt, declaring, in an audible whisper, she had "more than half a mind to send the foolish thing to bed;" then looked severely at her nephew.

"This girl," said he, "has become a member of our family, just as if she were a born relation. It seems to me there is no question of feeling or sentiment or prejudice in the matter. It is a mere affair of duty. We are bound to treat Nina Algernon exactly as if she were a Perkins."

His aunt took his face in both her hands, squeezed it hard, and flattened his nose with a grim kiss. After this feat she looked more severe than ever.

"I believe you are right," she said; "I believe this arrangement is a special duty sent on purpose for us to fulfil. I had made up my mind on the subject before I spoke to you, but it is satisfactory to know that you both think as I do. When we give way to our feelings, Susannah, we are sure to be injudicious, sometimes even unjust. But duty is a never-failing guide, and—O! my dears, to part with that darling would be to take the very heart out of my breast; and, Simon, I'm so glad you agree with me;

and, Susannah, dear, if I spoke harshly just now, it was for your own good; and—and—I'll just step up-stairs into the store-room, and look out some of the house-linen that wants mending. I had rather you didn't disturb me. I shall be down again to tea."

So the old lady marched out firmly enough, but sister and nephew both knew right well that kindly tears, long kept back from a sense of dignity, would drop on the half-worn house-linen, and that in the solitude of her store-room she would give vent to those womanly feelings she deemed it incumbent on her, as head of the family, to restrain before the rest.

Miss Susannah entertained no such scruples. Inflicting on her nephew a very tearful embrace, she sobbed out incoherent congratulations on the decision at which her eldest sister had arrived.

"But we mustn't let the dear girl find it out," said this sensitive, weak-minded, but generous-hearted lady. "We should make no sort of difference in our treatment of her, of course, but we must take great care not to let anything betray us in our manner. I am not good at concealment, I know, but I will undertake that she never suspects anything from mine."

The fallacy of this assertion was so transparent that Simon could not forbear a smile.

"Better make a clean breast of it at once," said he. "Directly there's a mystery in a family, Aunt Susannah, you may be sure there can be no union. It need not be put in a way to hurt her feelings. On the contrary, Aunt Jemima might impress on her that we count on her assistance to keep the pot boiling. Why, she's saving us pounds and pounds at this moment. Where should I get such a model for my Fairy Queen, I should like to know? It ought to be a great picture—a great picture, Aunt Susannah, if I can only work it out. And where should I be if she left me in the lurch? No—no; we won't forget the bundle of sticks. I'll to the maul-stick, and you and Aunt Jemima shall be as cross as two sticks; and as for Nina, with her bright eyes, and her pleasant voice, and her merry ways, I don't know what sort of a stick we should make of her."

"A fiddlestick, I should think," said that young lady, entering the room from the garden window, having heard, it is to be hoped, no more than Simon's closing sentence. "What are you two doing here in the dark? It's past eight—tea's ready—Aunt Jemima's down—and everything's getting cold."

Candles were lit in the next room, and the tea-things laid. Following the ladies, and watching with a painter's eye the lights and shades as they fell on Nina's graceful beauty, Simon Perkins felt, not for the first time, that if she were to leave the cottage, she would carry away with her all that made it a dear and happy home, depriving him at once of past, present, and future, taking from him the very cunning of his handicraft, and, worse still, the inspiration of his art.

It was no wonder she had wound herself round the hearts of that quiet little family in the retired Putney villa. As like Maud Bruce in form and feature, as though she had been her twin sister, Nina Algernon possessed the same pale, delicate features, the same graceful form, the same dark, pleading eyes and glossy raven hair; but Mr. Bruce's elder and unacknowledged daughter had this advantage over the younger, that about her there was a sweetness, a freshness, a quiet gaiety, and a *bonhomie* such as spring only from kindliness of disposition and pure unselfishness of heart. Had she been an ugly girl, though she might have lacked admirers, she could not have long remained without a lover. Being as handsome as Maud, she seemed calculated to rivet more attachments, while she made almost as many conquests. Between the sisters there was a similitude and a difference. One was a costly artificial flower, the other a real garden rose.

CHAPTER IX

THE USUAL DIFFICULTY

MAUD'S instincts, when, soon after her father's death, she felt a strong disinclination to live with Aunt Agatha, had not played her false. As inmates of the same house, the two ladies hit it off badly enough. Perhaps because in a certain imperiousness and hardness of character they were somewhat alike, their differences, though only on rare occasions culminating in a battle royal, smouldered perpetually, breaking out, more often than was seemly, in brisk skirmish and rapid passage of arms.

Miss Bruce's education during the lifetime of her parents had been little calculated to fit her for the position of a dependent, and with all her misgivings, which, indeed, vexed her sadly, she could not yet quite divest herself of an idea that her inheritance had not wholly passed away. Under any circumstances she resolved before long to go at the head of an establishment of her own, so that she should assume her proper position, which she often told herself, with *her* attractions and *her* opportunities was a mere question of will.

Then, like a band of iron tightening round her heart, would come the thought of her promise to Tom Ryfe, the bitter regret for her own weakness, her own overstrained notions of honour, as she now considered them, in committing that promise to writing. She felt as people feel in a dream, when, step which way they will, an insurmountable obstacle seems to arise, arresting their progress, and hemming them in by turns on every side.

It was not in the best of humours that, a few days after Lady Goldthred's party, Maud descended to the luncheon-table fresh from an hour's consideration of her grievances, and of the false position in which she was placed. Mrs. Stanmore, too, had just sent back a misfitting costume to the dressmaker for the third time; so each lady being, as it were, primed and loaded, the lightest spark would suffice to produce explosion.

While the servants remained it was necessary to keep the peace, but cutlets, mashed potatoes, and a ration of sherry having been distributed, the room was cleared, and a fair field remained for immediate action. Dick's train was late from Newmarket, and he was well out of it.

To do her justice, Maud had meant to intrench herself in sullen silence. She saw the attack coming, and prepared to remain on the defensive. Aunt Agatha began quietly enough—to borrow a metaphor from the noble game of chess, she advanced a pawn.

"I don't know how I'm to take you to Countess Monaco's to-night, Maud; that stupid woman has disappointed me again, and I've got literally nothing to go in. Besides, there will be such a crush we shall never get away in time for my cousin's ball. I promised her I'd be early if I could."

Now Miss Bruce knew, I suppose because he had told her, that Lord Bearwarden would be at Countess Monaco's reception, but would not be at the said ball. It is possible Mrs. Stanmore may have been aware of this also, and that her pawn simply represented what ladies call "aggravation."

Maud took it at once with her knight. "I don't the least care about Countess Monaco's, aunt," said she. "Dick's not going because he's not asked, and I'm engaged to dance the first dance with him at the other place. It's a family bear-fight, I conclude; but though I hate the kind of thing, Dick is sure to take care of *me*."

Check for Aunt Agatha, whom this off-hand speech displeased for more reasons than one. It galled her to be reminded that her step-son had received no invitation from the smart foreign countess; while that Maud should thus appropriate him, calling him "Dick" twice in a

breath, was more than she could endure. So she moved her king out of position.

"Talking of balls," said she, in a cold, civil voice, "reminds me that you danced three times the night before last with Lord Bearwarden, and twice with Dick, besides going down with him to supper. I don't like finding fault, Maud, but I have a duty to perform, and I speak to you as if you were my own child."

"How can you be sure of that?" retorted incorrigible Maud. "You never had one."

This was a sore point, as Miss Bruce well knew. Aunt Agatha's line of battle was sadly broken through, and her pieces huddled together on the board. She began to lose her head, and her temper with it.

"You speak in a very unbecoming tone, Miss Bruce," said she angrily. "You force me into saying things I would much rather keep to myself. I don't wish to remind you of your position in this house."

It was now Maud's turn to advance her strongest pieces —castles, rooks, and all.

"You remind me of it often enough," she replied, with her haughtiest air—an air which, notwithstanding its assumption of superiority, certainly made her look her best; "if not in words, at least in manner, twenty times a day. You think I don't see it, Mrs. Stanmore, or that I don't mind it, because I've too much pride to resent it as it deserves. I am indebted to you, certainly, for a great deal—the roof that shelters me, and the food I eat. I owe you as much as your carriage-horses, and a little less than your servants, for I do my work and get no wages. Never fear but I shall pay up everything some day; perhaps very soon. You had better get your bill made out, so as to send it in on the morning of my departure. I wish the time had come to settle it now."

Mrs. Stanmore was aghast. Very angry, no doubt, but yet more surprised, and perhaps the least thing cowed. Her cap, her laces, the lockets round her neck, the very hair of her head, vibrated with excitement. Maud, cool, pale, impassable, was sure to win at last, waiting, like the superior chess-player, for that final mistake which gives an adversary checkmate.

It came almost immediately. Mrs. Stanmore set down her sherry, because the hand that held her glass shook so she could not raise it to her lips. "You are rude and impertinent," said she; "and if you really think so wickedly, the sooner you leave this house the better, though you *are* my brother's child; and—and—Maud, I don't mean it. But how can you say such things? I never expected to be spoken to like this."

Then the elder lady began to cry, and the game was over. Before the second course came in a reconciliation took place. Maud presented a pale, cold cheek to be kissed by her aunt, and it was agreed that they should go to Countess Monaco's for the harmless purpose, as they expressed it, of "just walking through the rooms," leaving thereafter as soon as practicable for the ball; and Mrs. Stanmore, who was good-hearted if bad-tempered, trusted "dear Maud would think no more of what she had said in a moment of irritation, but that they would be better friends than ever after their little tiff."

None the less, though, for this decisive victory did the young lady cherish her determination to settle in life without delay. Lord Bearwarden had paid her considerable attention on the few occasions they had met. True, he was not what the world calls a "marrying man"; but the world, in arranging its romances, usually leaves out that very chapter—the chapter of accidents—on which the whole plot revolves. And why should there not be a Lady Bearwarden of the present as of the past? To land so heavy a fish would be a signal triumph. Well, it was at least possible, if not probable. This should be a matter for future consideration, and must depend greatly on circumstances.

In the meantime, Dick Stanmore would marry her to-morrow. Of that she felt sure. Why? O, because she did! I believe women seldom deceive themselves in such matters. Dick had never told her he cared for her; after all, she had not known him many weeks, yet a certain deference and softness of tone, a diffidence and even awkwardness of manner, increasing painfully when they were alone, betrayed that he was her slave. And she liked Dick, too, very much, as a woman could hardly help

liking that frank and kindly spirit. She even thought she could love him if it was necessary, or at any rate make him a good wife, as wives go. He would live in London, of course, give up hunting and all that. It really might do very well. Yes, she would think seriously about Dick Stanmore, and make up her mind without more delay.

But how to get rid of Tom Ryfe? Ignore it as she might—strive as she would to forget it in excitement, dissipation, and schemes for the future, none the less was the chain always round her neck. Even while it ceased to gall her she was yet sensible of its weight. So long as she owed him money, so long as he held her written promise to repay that debt with her hand, so long was she debarred all chances for the future, so long was she tied down to a fate she could not contemplate without a shudder. To be a "Mrs. Ryfe" when on the cards lay such a prize as the Bearwarden coronet, when she need only put out her hand and take Dick Stanmore, with his brown locks, his broad shoulders, his genial, generous heart, for better or worse! It was unbearable. And then to think that she could ever have fancied she liked the man; that, even now, she had to give him clandestine meetings, to see him at unseasonable hours, as if she loved him dearly, and was prepared to make every sacrifice for his sake! Her pride revolted, her whole spirit rose in arms at the reflection. She knew he cared for her too; cared for her in his own way very dearly; and "c'est ce que c'est d'être femme," I fear she hated him all the more! So long as a woman knows nothing about him, her suspicion that a man likes her is nine points out of ten in his favour; but directly she has fathomed his intellect and probed his heart; squeezed the orange, so to speak, and resolved to throw away the rind, in proportion to the constancy of his attachment will be her weariness of its duration; and from weariness in such matters there is but one short step to hatred and disgust.

Tom Ryfe must be paid his money. To this conclusion, at least, Maud's reflections never failed to lead. Without such initiatory proceeding it was useless to think of demanding the return of that written promise. But how to raise the funds? After much wavering and hesitation,

Miss Bruce resolved at last to pawn her diamonds. So dearly do women love their trinkets, that I believe, though he never knew it, Tom Ryfe was more than once within an ace of gaining the prize he longed for, simply from Maud's disinclination to part with her jewels. How little he dreamt that the very packet which had helped to cement into intimacy his first acquaintance with her should prove the means of dashing his cherished hopes to the ground, and raising yet another obstacle to shut him out from his lovely client!

While Maud is meditating in the back drawing-room, and Aunt Agatha, having removed the traces of emotion from her eyes and nose, is trying on a bonnet up-stairs, Dick Stanmore has shaken off the dust of a railway journey, in his lodgings, dressed himself from top to toe, and is driving his phaeton merrily along Piccadilly, on his way to Belgrave Square. How his heart leaps as he turns the well-known corner! how it beats as he skips into his step-mother's house!—how it stops when he reaches the door of that back drawing-room, where, knowing the ways of the establishment, he hopes to find his treasure alone! The colour returns to his face. There she is in her usual place, her usual attitude, languid, graceful, indolent, yet glad to see him nevertheless.

"I'm in luck," said Dick, blushing like a school-boy. "My train was late, and I was so afraid you'd be gone out before I could get here. It seems so long since I've seen you. And where have you been, and how's my mother, and what have you been doing?"

"What have *you* been doing, rather?" repeats the young lady, giving him a cool and beautiful hand that he keeps in his own as long as he dares. "Three days at Newmarket are long enough to make 'a man or a mouse,' as you call it, of a greater capitalist than you, Mr. Stanmore. Seriously, I hope you've had a good week."

"Only lost a pony on the whole meeting," answered Dick triumphantly. "And even that was a 'fluke,' because Bearwarden's Bacchante filly was left at the post."

"I congratulate you," said Maud, with laughter gleaming in her dark eyes. "I suppose you consider that tanta-

mount to winning. Was Lord Bearwarden much disappointed, and did he swear horribly?"

"Bearwarden never swears," replied Dick. "He only told the starter he wondered he could get them off at all; for it must have put him out sadly to see all the boys laughing at him. I've no doubt one or two were fined in the very next race, for the official didn't seem to like it."

Maud pondered. "Is Lord Bearwarden very good-tempered?" said she.

"Well, he never breaks out," answered Dick. "But why do you want to know?"

"Because you and he are such friends," said this artful young lady. "Because I can't make him out—because I don't care whether he is or not! And now, Mr. Stanmore, though you've not been to see your mamma yet, you've behaved like a good boy, considering; so I've got a little treat in store for you. Will you drive me out in your phaeton?"

"Will a duck swim?" exclaimed Dick, delighted beyond measure, with but the one drawback to supreme happiness, of a wish that his off-horse had been more than twice in harness.

"Now before I go to put my bonnet on," continued Miss Bruce, threatening him with her finger like a child, "you must promise to do exactly what you're told—to drive very slow and very carefully, and to set me down the instant I'm tired of you, because Aunt Agatha won't hear of our going for more than half-an-hour or so, and it will take some diplomacy to arrange even that."

Then she tripped up-stairs, leaving the door open, so that Dick, looking at himself in the glass, wondering, honest fellow, what she could see in him to like, and thinking what a lucky dog he was, overheard the following conversation at the threshold of his step-mother's chamber on the floor above.

A light tap—a smothered "Who's there?" and the silvery tones of the voice he loved—

"Aunt Agatha—may Mr. Stanmore drive me to Rose and Brilliant's in his phaeton?"

Something that sounded very like "Certainly not."

"But please, Aunt Agatha," pleaded the voice, "I've

got a headache, and an open carriage will do me so much good, and you can call for me afterwards, whenever you like, to do our shopping. I sha'n't be five minutes putting my bonnet on, and the wind's changed, and it's such a beautiful day!"

Here a door opened, whispers were exchanged, it closed with a bang, a bell rang, an organ in the street struck up "The Marseillaise," and ere it had played eight bars, Maud was on the stairs again looking, to Dick's admiring eyes, like an angel in a bonnet coming straight down from heaven.

In after-days he often thought of that happy drive—of the pale beautiful face, in its transparent little bonnet, turned confidingly upwards to his own, of the winning ways, the playfully imperious gestures, the sweet caressing voice—of the hope thrilling to his very heart that perhaps for him might be reserved the blissful lot of thus journeying with her by his side through life.

As they passed into the Park at Albert Gate, two of his young companions nodded and took off their hats, elbowing each other, as who should say, "I suppose that's a case!" How proud Dick felt, and how happy! The quarter of a mile that brought him to Apsley House seemed a direct road to Paradise; the man who is always watering the rhododendrons shone like a glorified being, and the soft west wind fanned his temples like an air from heaven. How pleasant she was, how quaint, how satirical, how amusing! Not the least frightened when that off-horse shied in Piccadilly—not the least impatient (neither, be sure, was he) when a block of carriages kept them stationary for ten minutes in the narrow gorge of Bond Street. Long before they stopped at Rose and Brilliant's it was all over with Dick.

"You're not to get out," said Maud, while they drew up to the door of that fashionable jeweller. "Yes, you may, just to keep my dress off the wheel, but you mustn't come in. I said I'd a treat for you; now tell me without prevarication—will you have sleeve-links with a cipher or a monogram? Speak up—in one word—quick!"

Sleeve-links! and from *her!* A present to be valued and cherished more than life itself. He could hardly

believe his senses. Far too bewildered to solve the knotty point of cipher *versus* monogram, he muttered some incoherent syllables, and only began to recover when he had stared blankly for a good five minutes at the off-horse's ears, from the driving-seat of his phaeton.

It took a long time apparently to pick out those sleeve-links. Perhaps the choicest assortment of such articles remained in the back shop, for thither Miss Bruce retired; and it is possible she may have appealed to the proprietor's taste in her selection, since she was closeted with that gentleman in earnest conference for three-quarters of an hour. Dick had almost got tired of waiting, when she emerged at last to thank him for her drive, and to present him, as she affirmed, with the results of her protracted shopping.

"There is a design on them already," said she, slipping a little box of card into his hand with her pleasantest smile, "so I could not have your initials engraved, but I dare say you won't lose them all the same."

Dick rather thought *not*, hiding the welcome keepsake away in his waistcoat-pocket, as near his heart as the construction of that garment would permit; but his day's happiness was over now, for Mrs. Stanmore had arrived in her brougham to take his companion away for the rest of the afternoon.

That night, before he went to bed, I think he was fool enough to kiss the insensible sleeve-links more than once. They were indeed choice little articles of workmanship, bearing on their surface two quaint and fanciful designs, representing a brace of Cupids in difficulty, the one singed by his own torch, the other crying over a broken bow.

At the same hour Maud was enclosing an order for a large sum of money in a letter which seemed to cost her much study and vexation. Even Miss Bruce found some difficulty in explaining to a lover that she valued truth, honour, and fidelity at so many hundred pounds, while she begged to forward him a cheque for the amount in lieu of the goods marked "damaged and returned."

CHAPTER X

THE FAIRY QUEEN

I HAVE said that Simon Perkins was a painter to the tips of his fingers. Just as a carpenter cannot help looking at a piece of wood with a professional glance it is impossible to mistake—a glance that seems to embrace at once its length, depth, thickness, toughness, and general capabilities —so a painter views every object in nature, animate or inanimate, as a subject for imitation and study of his art. The heavens are not too high, the sea too deep, nor the desert too wide to afford him a lesson; and the human countenance, with its endless variety of feature and expression, is a book he never wearies of learning by heart. When his professional interest in beauty is enhanced by warmer feelings, it may be imagined that vanity could require no fuller tribute of admiration than the worship of one whose special gift it is to decide on the symmetry of outward form.

As a painter, Simon Perkins approved of Nina Algernon —as a man he loved her. Lest his position should not prove sufficiently fatal, she had become of late practically identified with his art, almost as completely as she was mixed up with his every-day life. For many months, perhaps even for years, the germ of a great work had taken root in his imagination. Slowly, almost painfully, that germ developed itself, passing through several stages, sketch upon sketch, till it came to maturity at last in the composition of a large picture on which he was now employed.

The subject afforded ample scope for liberty of fancy in form and grouping—for the indulgence of a gorgeous taste in colouring and costume. It represented Thomas the Rhymer in Fairyland, at the moment when its glamour is falling from his eyes, when its magic lustre is dying out on all that glittering pageantry and the elfin is fading to a gnome. The handsome wizard turns from a crowd of phantom shapes, half lovely, half grotesque—for their change is even now in progress—to look wistfully and appealingly on the queen.

There is a pained expression in his comely features, of hurt affection, and trust betrayed, yet not without a ray of pride and triumph, that, come what might to the others, she is still unchanged. Around him the fairies are shedding their glory as trees in autumn shed their leaves. Here a sweet laughing face surmounts the hideous body of an imp, there the bright scales of an unearthly armour shrivel to rottenness and dust. The dazzling robes are turning blank and colourless, the emerald rays waning to a pale, sad light, the flashing diadem is dulled and dim. Yet on the fairy queen there lowers no shadow of change, there threaten no symptoms of decay.

Bathed in the halo of a true though hapless love, she is still the same as when he first saw her all those seven long years ago, glistening in immortal charms, and knelt to her for the queen of heaven, where she rode—"under the linden tree."

It is obvious that on her countenance, besides the stamp of exceeding beauty, there must appear sorrow, self-reproach, fortitude, majesty, and undying tenderness. All these the painter thought he read in Nina Algernon's girlish face.

So she sat to him dutifully enough for a model of his fairy queen, and if she wearied at times, as I think she must, comforted herself with the remembrance that in this way she helped the family who gave her bread.

For the convenience of sitters, Simon Perkins had his painting-room in Berners Street: thither it was his custom to resort in the morning, by penny steamer or threepenny omnibus, and there he spent many happy hours working hard with palette and brush. Not the least golden seemed

those in which Nina accompanied him to sit patiently while he studied, and drew her, line by line, feature by feature. The expeditions to and fro were delightful, the labour was pleasure, the day was gone far too soon.

A morning could not but be fine, when, emerging from an omnibus at Albert Gate, Simon walked by the side of his model through Hyde Park on their way to Berners Street; but about this period one morning seemed even finer than common, because that Nina, taking his arm as they crossed Rotten Row, thought fit to confide to him an interview of the day before with Aunt Jemima, in which she extorted from that dear old lady with some difficulty the fact of her own friendless position in the world.

"And I don't mind it a bit," continued the girl, catching her voice like a child, as was her habit when excited, "for I'm sure you're all so kind to me that I'd much rather not have any other friends. And I don't want to be independent, and I'll never leave you, so long as you'll keep me. And O, Simon, isn't it good of your aunts, and you too, to have taken care of me ever since I was quite a little thing? For I'm no relation, you know—and how can I ever do enough for you? I can't. It's impossible. And you don't want me to, if I could!"

Notwithstanding the playful manner which was part of Nina's self, there were tears of real feeling in her eyes, and I doubt if Simon's were quite dry while he answered—

"You belong to us just as much as if you *were* a relation, Nina. My aunts have said so ever since I can remember, and as for me, why you used to ride on my foot when you were in short frocks! What a little romp it was! Always troublesome, and always will be—and that's why we're so fond of you." He spoke lightly, but his voice shook nevertheless.

"So you ought to be," she answered. "For you know how much I love you all."

"What, even stern Aunt Jemima?" said this blundering young man, clumsily beating about the bush, and thus scaring the bird quite as much as if he had thrust his hand boldly into the nest.

"Aunt Jemima best of all," replied Nina saucily, "be-

cause she's the eldest, and tries to keep me in order, but she can't."

"And which of us next best, Nina?" continued he, turning away with extraordinary interest in a mowing-machine.

"Aunt Susannah, of course." This very demurely, while tightening her pretty lips to keep back a laugh.

"Then I come last," he observed gently; but there was something in the tone that made her glance sharply in his face.

She pressed his arm. "You dear old simple Simon," said she kindly. "Surely you must know me by this time. I love you very dearly, just as if you were my brother. Brother, indeed! I don't think if I'd a father I could be much fonder of him than I am of you."

What a bright morning it had been five minutes ago, and now the sky seemed clouded all at once. Simon even thought the statue of Achilles looked more grim and ghostly than usual, lowering there in his naked bronze.

She had wounded him very deeply, that pretty unconscious archer. These random shafts for which no interposing shield makes ready are sure to find the joints in our harness. A tough hard nature such as constitutes the true fighter only presses more doggedly to the front, but gentler spirits are fain to turn aside out of the battle, and go home to die. There came a dimness before Simon's eyes, and a ringing in his ears. He scarcely heard his companion, while she asked—

"Who are those men bowing? Do you know them? They must take me for somebody else."

"Those men bowing" were two no less important characters than Lord Bearwarden and Tom Ryfe, the latter in the act of selling the former a horse. Such transactions, for some mysterious reason, always take place in the morning, and whatever arguments may be adduced against a too enthusiastic worship of the noble animal, at least it promotes early rising.

Tom Ryfe was one of those men rarely seen in the saddle or on the box, but who, nevertheless, always seem to have a horse to dispose of, whatever be the kind required. Hack, hunter, pony, phaeton-horse, he was either possessor

of the very animal you wanted, or could suit you with it at twenty-four hours' notice; yet if you met him by accident riding in the Park, he was sure to tell you he had been mounted by a friend; if you saw him driving a team—and few could handle four horses in a crowded thoroughfare with more neatness and precision—you might safely wager it was from the box of another man's coach.

He was supposed to be a very fine rider over a country, and there were vague traditions of his having gone exceedingly well through great runs on special occasions; but these exploits had obviously lost nothing of their interest in the process of narration, and were indeed enhanced by that obscurity which increases the magnitude of most things, in the moral as in the material world.

Mr. Ryfe knew all the sporting men about London, but not their wives. He was at home on the Downs and the Heath, in the pavilion at Lord's, and behind the traps of the Red House. He dined pretty frequently at the barracks of the household troops, welcome to the genial spirits of his entertainers, chiefly for those qualities with which they themselves credited him; and he called Bearwarden "My lord," wherefore that nobleman thought him a snob, and would perhaps have considered him a still greater if he had *not*. The horse in question showed good points and fine action. Mr. Ryfe walked, trotted, cantered, and finally reined him up at the rails on which Lord Bearwarden was leaning.

"Rather a flat-catcher, Tom," said that nobleman, between the whiffs of a cigar. "Too much action for a hunter, and too little body. He wouldn't carry my weight if the ground was deep, though he's not a bad goer, I'll admit."

"Exactly what I said at first, my lord," answered Tom, slipping the reins through his fingers, and letting the horse reach over the iron bar against his chest to crop the tufts of grass beneath, an attitude in which his fine shoulders and liberty of frame showed to great advantage. "I never thought he was a fourteen-stone horse, and I never told you so."

"And I never told *you* I rode fourteen stone, did I?"

replied Lord Bearwarden, who was a little touchy on that score. "Thirteen five at the outside, and not so much as that after deer-stalking in Scotland. He's clean thoroughbred, isn't he?"

The purchaser was biting, and Tom understood his business as if he had been brought up to it.

"Clean," he answered, passing his leg over the horse's neck, and sliding to the ground, thus leaving his saddle empty for the other. "But he's thrown away on a heavy man. His place is carrying thirteen stone over high Leicestershire. Nothing could touch him there amongst the hills. Jumping's a vulgar accomplishment. Plenty of them can jump if one dare ride them, but he's really an extraordinary fencer. Such a mouth, too, and such a *gentleman!* Why he's the pleasantest hack in London. You like a nice hack, my lord. Get up and feel him. It's like riding a bird."

So Lord Bearwarden jumped on, and altered the stirrups, and crammed his hat down, ere he rode the horse to and fro, trying him in all his paces, and probably falling in love with him forthwith, for he returned with a brightened eye and higher colour to Tom Ryfe on the footway.

It was at this juncture both gentlemen started and took their hats off to the lady who walked some fifty paces off, arm-in-arm with Simon Perkins, the painter.

Their salute was not returned. The lady, indeed, to whom it was addressed seemed to hurry on all the faster with her companion. It was remarkable, and both remarked it, that neither made any observation on this lack of courtesy, but finished their bargain without apparently half so much interest in sale or purchase as they felt five minutes ago.

"You'll dine with us, Tom, on the 11th?" said Bearwarden, when they parted opposite Knightsbridge Barracks, but he was obviously thinking of something else.

"On the 11th," repeated Tom—"delighted, my lord—at eight o'clock, I suppose," and turned his horse's head soberly towards Piccadilly, proceeding at a walk, as one who revolved certain reflections, not of the most agreeable, in his mind. A dinner at the barracks was usually rather

an event with Mr. Ryfe, but on the present occasion he forgot all about it before he had gone a hundred yards.

Lord Bearwarden, rejecting the temptation of luncheon in the mess-room, ran up-stairs to his own quarters to think—of course he smoked at the same time.

This nobleman was one of the many of his kind who, to their credit be it said, are not spoiled by sailing down the stream with the wind in their favour. He had been "a good fellow" at Eton, he remained "a good fellow" in the regiment. With general society he was not perhaps quite so popular. People said he "required knowing"; and for those who didn't choose to take the trouble of knowing him he was a little reserved; with men, even a little rough. His manner was of the world, worldly, and gave the idea of complete heartlessness and *savoir faire;* yet under this seemingly impervious covering lurked a womanly romance of temperament, a womanly tenderness of heart, than which nothing would have made him so angry as to be accused of possessing. His habits were manly and simple, his chief ambition was to distinguish himself as a soldier, and so far as he could find opportunity he had seen service with credit on the staff. A keen sportsman, he could ride and shoot as well as his neighbours, and this is saying no little amongst the young officers of the Household Brigade.

Anything but a "ladies' man," there was yet something about Bearwarden, irrespective of his income and his coronet, that seemed to interest women of all temperaments and characters. They would turn away from far handsomer, better dressed, and more amusing people to attract his notice when he entered a room, and the more enterprising would even make fierce love to him on further acquaintance, particularly after they discovered what uphill work it was. Do they appreciate a difficulty the greater trouble it requires to surmount, or do they enjoy a scrape the more, that they have to squeeze themselves into it by main force? I wonder if the sea-nymphs love their Tritons because those zoophytes must necessarily be so cold! It is doubtless against the hard impenetrable rock that the sea-waves dash themselves again and again. Bearwarden responded but faintly to the boldest advances.

There must be a reason for it, said the fair assailants. Curiosity grew into interest, and, flavoured with a dash of pique, formed one of those messes with which, in stimulating their vanity, women fancy they satisfy their hunger of the heart.

Bearwarden was a man with a history; of this they were quite sure, and herein they were less mistaken than people generally find themselves who jump to conclusions. Yes, Bearwarden had a history, and a sad one, so far as the principal actor was concerned. Indeed he dared not think much about it even yet, and drove it—for he was no weak, silly sentimentalist—by sheer force of will out of his mind. Indeed, if it had not wholly changed his *real* self, it had encrusted him with that hardness and roughness of exterior which he turned instinctively to the world. The same thing had happened to him that happens to most of us at one time or another. Just as the hunting man, sooner or later, is pretty sure to be laid up with a broken collar-bone, so in the career of life must be encountered that inevitable disaster which results in a wounded spirit and a sore heart. The collar-bone, we all know, is a six weeks' job; but injuries of a tenderer nature take far longer to heal. Nevertheless, the cure of these, too, is but a question of time, though, to carry on the metaphor, I think in either case the hapless rider loses some of the zest and dash which distinguished his earlier performances, previous to discomfiture. "Only a woman's hair," wrote Dean Swift on a certain packet hidden away in his desk. And thus a very dark page in Lord Bearwarden's history might have been headed "Only a woman's falsehood." Not much to make a fuss about, surely; but he was kind, generous, of a peculiarly trustful disposition, and it punished him very sharply, though he tried hard to bear his sorrow like a man. It was the usual business. He had attached himself to a lady of somewhat lower social standing than his own, of rather questionable antecedents, and whom the world accepted to a certain extent on sufferance, as it were, and under protest, yet welcomed her cordially enough, nevertheless. His relations abused her, his friends warned him against her; of course he loved her very dearly, all the more that he had to sacrifice

many interests for her sake, and so resolved to make her his wife.

For reasons of her own she stipulated that he should leave his regiment, and even in this, though he would rather have lost an arm, he yielded to her wish.

The letter to his colonel, in which he requested permission to send in his papers, actually lay sealed on the table, when he received a note in a well-known hand that taught him the new lesson he had never expected to learn. The writer besought his forgiveness, deploring her own heartlessness the while, and proceeded to inform him that there was a Somebody else in the field to whom she was solemnly promised (just as she had been to him), and with whom she was about to unite her Lot—capital L. She never could be happy, of course, but it was her destiny: to fight against it was useless, and she trusted Lord B. would forget her, etc., etc. All this in well-chosen language, and written with an exceedingly good pen.

It was lucky his letter to the colonel had not been sent. In such sorrows as these a soldier learns how his regiment is his real home, how his comrades are the staunchest, the least obtrusive, and the sincerest of friends.

Patting his charger's neck at the very next field-day, Bearwarden told himself there was much to live for still; that it would be unsoldierlike, unmanly, childish, to neglect duty, to wince from pleasure, to turn his back on all the world had to offer, only because a woman followed her nature and changed her mind.

So he bore it very well, and those who knew him best wondered he cared so little: and all the while he never heard a strain of music, nor felt a ray of sunshine, nor looked on beauty of any kind whatever, without that gnawing cruel pain at his heart. Thus the years passed on, and the women of his family declared that Bearwarden was a confirmed old bachelor.

When he met Miss Bruce at Lady Goldthred's, no doubt he admired her beauty and approved of her manner, but it was neither beauty nor manner, nor could he have explained what it was, that caused the pulses within him to stir, as they stirred long ago—that brought back a certain flavour of the old draught he had quaffed so eagerly,

to find it so bitter at the dregs. Another meeting with Maud, a dance or two, a whisper on a crowded staircase, and Lord Bearwarden told himself that the deep wound had healed at last; that the grass was growing fresh and fair over the grave of a dead love; that for him too, as for others, there might still be an interest in the chances of the great game.

Surely the blind restored to sight is more grateful, more joyous, more triumphant, than he who, born in darkness, finds himself overwhelmed and dazzled with the glare of his new gift!

Some men are so strangely constituted that they like a woman all the better for "snubbing" them. Lord Bearwarden had never felt so grave an interest in Miss Bruce as when he entered the barracks under the impression she had cut him dead, without the slightest pretext or excuse.

Not so Tom Ryfe. In that gentleman's mind mingled the several disagreeable sensations of surprise, anger, jealousy, and disgust. Of these he chewed the bitter cud while he rode home, wondering with whom Miss Bruce could thus dare to parade herself in public, maddened at the open rebellion inferred by so ignoring his presence and his love, vowing to revenge himself without delay by tightening the curb and making her feel, to her cost, the hold he possessed over her person and her actions. By the time he reached his uncle's house, he had made up his mind to demand an explanation, to come to a final understanding, to assert his authority, and to avenge his pride. He turned pale to see Maud's monogram on the envelope of a letter that had arrived during his absence; paler still, when from this letter a thin slip of stamped paper fluttered to the floor—white to the very lips while he read the sharp, decisive, cruel lines that accounted for its presence in the missive, and that bade him relinquish at a word all the hope and happiness of his life. Without unbuttoning his coat, without removing the hat from his head, or the gloves from his hands, he sat fiercely down, and wrote his answer.

"You think to get rid of me, Miss Bruce, as you would get rid of an unsuitable servant, by giving him his wages

and bidding him to go about his business. You imagine that the debt between us is such as a sum of money can at once wipe out: that because you have been able to raise this money (and how you did so I think I have a right to ask) our business connection ceases, and the *lover*, inconvenient, no doubt, from his priority of claim, must go to the wall directly the *lawyer* has been paid his bill. You never were more mistaken in your life. Have you forgotten a certain promise I hold of yours, written in your own hand, signed with your own signature, furnished, as itself attests, of your own free will? and do you think I am a likely man to forego such an advantage? You might have had me for a friend—how dear a friend I cannot bear to tell you now. If you persist in making me an enemy, you have but yourself to blame. I am not given to threaten; and you know that I can generally fulfil what I promise. I give you fair warning then: so surely as you try, in the faintest item, to elude your bargain, so surely will I cross your path, and spoil your game, and show you up before the world. Mine you are, and mine you shall be. If of free will, happily; if not, then to your misery and my own. But, mark me, always *mine!*"

"The wisest clerks are not the wisest men." It is a bad plan ever to drive a woman into a corner; and with all his knowledge of law, I think Mr. Ryfe could hardly have written a more ill-advised and injudicious letter than the above to Miss Bruce.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE SCALES

It was a declaration of war. Of all women in the world—and this is saying a great deal—Maud was perhaps the least disposed to accept anything like usurpation, or assumption of undue authority, especially on the part of one in whose character she had detected an element of weakness. Tom Ryfe, notwithstanding his capabilities, was a fool, like most others, where his feelings were touched, and proved it by the injudicious means he used to attain the end he so desired.

Locked in her own room, she read his letter over and over again, with a bitter curl of her lip, that denoted hatred, scorn, even contempt. When a man has been unfortunate enough to excite the last of these amiable feelings, he should lose no time in decamping, for the game is wholly and irretrievably lost. Mr. Ryfe would have felt this, could he have seen the gestures of the woman he loved, while she tore his letter into shreds—could he have marked the carriage of her haughty head, the compression of her sweet, resolute lips, the fierce energy of her white, cruel hands. Maud paced the floor for some half-dozen turns, opened the window, arranged the bottles on her toilet-table, the flowers on her chimney-piece, even took a good long look at herself in the glass, and sat down to think.

For weeks she had been revolving in her mind the necessity of breaking with Tom Ryfe, the policy of securing position and freedom by an early marriage. That odious

letter decided her; and now it only remained to make her choice. There are women—and these, though sometimes the most fascinating, by no means the most trustworthy of their sex—who possess over mankind a mesmeric influence, almost akin to witchcraft. Without themselves feeling deeply, perhaps for the very reason that they do *not*, they are capable of exercising a magic sway over those with whom they come in contact; and while they attract more admirers than they know what to do with, are seldom very fortunate in their selection, or happy in their eventual lot. Miss Bruce was one of these witches, far more mischievous than the old conventional hags we used to burn under the sapient government of our first Stuart, and she knew a deal better than any old woman who ever mounted a broomstick the credulity of her victims, the dangerous power of her spells. These she had lately been using freely. It was time to turn their exercise to good account.

"Mr. Stanmore *would*, in a moment," thought Maud, "if I only gave him the slightest hint. And I like him. Yes, I like him very much indeed. Poor Dick! What a fool one can make a man look, to be sure, when he's in love, as people call it! Aunt Agatha wouldn't much fancy it, I suppose; not that I should care two pins about that. And Dick's very easy to manage—too easy, I think. He seems as if I couldn't make him angry. I made him *sorry*, though, the other day, poor fellow! but that's not half such fun. Now Lord Bearwarden *has* got a temper, I'm sure. I wonder, if we were to quarrel, which would give in first. I don't think I should. I declare it would be rather nice to try. He's good-looking—that's to say, good-looking for a *man*. It's an ugly animal at best. And they tell me the Den is such a pretty place in the autumn! And twenty thousand a year! I don't care so much about the money part of it. Of course one must have money; but Selina St. Croix assured me that they called him The Impenetrable; and there wasn't a girl in London he ever danced with twice. *Wasn't* there? He danced with me three times in two hours; but I didn't say so. I suppose people *would* open their eyes. I've a great mind—a *very* great mind. But then, there's Dick. He'd be horribly bored, poor fellow! And the worst of it is, he wouldn't *say*

anything; but I know exactly how he'd look, and I should feel I was a *beast!* What a bother it all is! But something must be done. I can't go on with this sort of life; I can't stand Aunt Agatha much longer. There she goes, calling on the stairs again! Why can't she send my maid up, if she wants me?"

But Miss Bruce ran down willingly enough when her aunt informed her, from the first floor, that she must make haste, and Dick was in the large drawing-room.

She found mother and son, as they called themselves, buried in a litter of cards, envelopes, papers of every description referring to "Peerage," "Court Guide," visiting-list—all such aids to memory—the charts, as it were, of that voyage which begins in the middle of April, and ends with the last week in July. As usual on great undertakings, from the opening of a campaign to the issuing of invitations for a ball, too much had been left to the last moment; there was a great deal to do, and little time to do it.

"We can't get on without *you*, Miss Bruce," said Dick, with rising colour and averted eyes, that denoted how much less efficient an auxiliary he would prove since she had come into the room. "My mother has mislaid the old visiting-list, and the new one only goes down to T: so that the U's, and the V's, and W's will be all left out. Think how we shall be hated in London next week! To be sure it's what my mother calls 'small and early,' like young potatoes, and I hear there are three hundred cards sent out already."

"You'll only hinder us, Mr. Stanmore," said Maud. "Hadn't you better go away again?" but observing Dick's face fall, the smiling eyes added, plainly as words could speak, "if you *can!*" She looked pale though, and unhappy, he thought. Of course he felt fonder of her than ever.

"Hinder you!" he repeated. "Why, I'm the mainstay of the whole performance. Don't I bring you eight-and-twenty dancing men? all at once if you wish it, in a body, like soldiers."

"Nonsense, my dear," interrupted Aunt Agatha. "The staircase will be crowded enough as it is."

Maud laughed.

"But are they *real* dancing men?" she asked, "not 'dummies,' 'duffers,'—what do you call them? people who only stand against the wall and look idiotic. They're no use unless they work regularly through, as if it was a match or a boat-race. I don't call it dancing to hover about, and be always wanting to go down to tea or supper, and to haunt one and look cross if one behaves with common propriety—like some people I know."

Dick accepted the imputation.

"*I'm* not a dancing man," said he, "though my eight-and-twenty friends are. I cannot see the pleasure of being hustled about in a hot room with a girl I never saw before in my life, and never want to see again,—who is looking beyond me all the time, watching the door for another fellow who never comes."

"Then why on earth do you go?" asked Miss Bruce simply.

"*You* know why," he answered in a low voice, without raising his eyes to her face.

"O! I dare say," replied Maud; but though it was couched in a tone of banter, the smile that accompanied this pertinent remark seemed to afford Dick unbounded satisfaction.

Mrs. Stanmore looked up from her writing-table.

"I can't get on while you two are jabbering in that corner." (She had not heard a word either of them said.) "I'll take my visiting-list up-stairs. You can put these cards in envelopes and direct them. It will help me a little, but you're neither of you much use."

She gathered her materials together, and was leaving the room. Dick's heart began beating to some purpose; but his step-mother stopped at the door and addressed her niece.

"By the bye, Maud, I'd almost forgotten. I'm going to Rose and Brilliant's. Fetch me your diamonds, and I'll take them to be cleaned. I can see the people myself, you know, and make sure of your having them back in time for the ball."

The girl turned white. Dick saw it, though his mother did not. He observed, too, that she gasped as if she was trying to form words which would not come.

"I am not going to wear them." She got it out at last with difficulty.

"Not wear them! nonsense!" was the reply. "Bring them down, my dear, at any rate, and let me look them over. If you don't want it, you might lend me the collar —it would go very well with my mauve satin."

Maud's eyes turned here and there as if to look for help, and it was Dick's nature to throw himself in the gap.

"I'll take them, mother," said he. "My phaeton's at the door now. You've plenty to do, and it will save you a long drive. Besides, I can blow the people up more effectually than a lady."

"I'm not so sure of that," answered Mrs. Stanmore. "However, it's a sensible plan enough. Maud can fetch them down for you, and you may come back to dinner if you're disengaged."

So speaking, Mrs. Stanmore sailed off, leaving the young people alone.

Maud thanked him with such a look as would have repaid Dick for a far longer expedition than from Belgravia to Bond Street.

"What should I do without you, Mr. Stanmore?" she said. "You always come to the rescue just when I want you most."

He coloured with delight.

"I like doing things for *you*," said he simply; "but I don't know that taking a parcel a mile and a half is such a favour after all. If you'll bring it, I'll start directly you give the word."

Miss Bruce had been very pale hitherto, now a burning blush swept over her face to the temples.

"I—I can't bring you my diamonds," said she, "for the first of those thirty reasons that prevented Napoleon's general from bringing up his guns—I haven't got them: they're at Rose and Brilliant's already."

"Maud!" he exclaimed, unconsciously using her Christian name—a liberty with which she seemed in nowise offended.

"You may well say 'Maud'!" she murmured in a soft, low voice. "If you knew all, you'd never call me Maud. I don't believe you'd ever speak to me again."

"Then I'd rather *not* know all," he replied. "Though it would have to be something very bad indeed if it could make me think ill of *you!* Don't tell me anything, Miss Bruce, except that you would like your diamonds back again."

"They *must* be got back!" she exclaimed. "I *must* have them back by fair means or foul. I can't face Aunt Agatha, now that she knows, and can't appear at her ball without them. O! Mr. Stanmore, what shall I do? Do you think Rose and Brilliant's would *lend* them to me only for one night?"

Dick began to suspect something, began to surmise that this young lady had been "raising the wind," as he called it, and to wonder for what mysterious purpose she could want so large a sum as had necessitated the sacrifice of her most valuable jewels; but she seemed in such distress that he felt this was no time for explanation.

"Do!" he repeated cheerfully, and walking to the window that he might not seem to notice her trouble. "Why do as I wish you had done all through—leave everything to *me.* I was going to say 'trust me,' but I don't want to be trusted. I only want to be made use of."

Her better nature was conquering her fast.

"But indeed I *will* trust you," she murmured. "You deserve to be trusted. You are so kind, so good, so true. You will despise me, I know—very likely hate me, and never come to see me again; but I don't care—I can't help it. Sit down, and I will tell you everything."

He did not blush nor stammer now, his voice was very firm, and he stood up like a man.

"Miss Bruce," said he, "Maud—yes, I'm not afraid to call you Maud—I won't hear another word. I don't want to be told anything. Whatever you have done makes no difference to me. Some day, perhaps, you'll remember how I believed in you. In the meantime tell my mother that the diamonds will be back in time for her ball. How late it is! I must be off like a shot. Those horses will be perfectly wild with waiting. I'm coming to dinner. Good-bye!"

He hurried away without another look, and Maud,

burying her head in the sofa-cushions, burst out crying, as she had not cried since she was a child.

"He's too good for me!—he's too good for me!" she repeated, between the sobs she tried hard to keep back. "How wicked and vile I should be to throw him over! He's too good for me!—too good for me by far!"

CHAPTER XII

"A CRUEL PARTING"

THE phaeton-horses went off like wildfire, Dick driving as if he was drunk. Omnibus-cads looked after him with undisguised admiration, and hansom cabmen, catching the enthusiasm of pace, found themselves actually wishing they were gentlemen's servants, to have their beer found, and sit behind such steppers as those!

The white foam stood on flank and shoulder when the pair were pulled up at Rose and Brilliant's door.

Dick bustled in with so agitated an air that an experienced shopman instantly lifted the glass from a tray containing the usual assortment of wedding-rings.

"I'm come about some diamonds," panted the customer, casting a wistful glance towards these implements of coercion the while. "A set of diamonds—very valuable—left here by a lady—a young lady—I want them back again."

He looked about him helplessly; nevertheless, the shopman, himself a married man, became at once less commiserating, and more confidential.

"Diamonds!" he repeated. "Let me see—yes, sir—quite so—I think I recollect. Perhaps you'll step in and speak to our principal. Mind your hat, if you please, sir—yes, sir—this way, sir."

So saying, he ushered Mr. Stanmore through glass doors into a neat little room at the back, where sat a bald, smiling personage in sober attire, something between that of a provincial master of hounds and a low-church clergyman, whose cool composure, as it struck Dick at the

time, afforded a ludicrous contrast to his own fuss and agitation.

"*My* name is Rose, sir," said the placid man. "Pray take a seat."

Nobody can "take a seat" under feelings of strong excitement. Dick grasped the proffered chair by the back.

"Mr. Rose," he began, "what I have to say to you goes no farther."

"O dear, no!—certainly not—Mr. Stanmore, I believe? I hope I see you well, sir. This is my *private* room, you understand, sir. Whatever affairs we transact here are *in* private. How can I accommodate you, Mr. Stanmore?" Dick looked so eager, the placid man was persuaded he must want money.

"There's a young lady," said Dick, plunging at his subject, "who left her diamonds here last week—quite a young lady—very handsome. Did she give you her name?"

Mr. Rose smiled and shook his head benevolently. "If any jewels of value were left with *us*, you may be sure we satisfied ourselves of the party's name and address. Perhaps I can help you, Mr. Stanmore. Can you favour me with the date?"

"Yes, I can," answered Dick, "and the name too. It's no use humbugging about it. Miss Bruce was the lady's name. There! Now she wants her jewels back again. She's changed her mind."

Mr. Rose took a ledger off the table, and ran his finger down its columns. "Quite correct, sir," said he, stopping at a particular entry. "You are acquainted with the circumstances, of course."

Dick nodded, esteeming it little breach of confidence to look as if he knew all about it.

"There is no difficulty whatever," continued the bland Mr. Rose. "Happy to oblige Miss Bruce. Happy to oblige *you*. We shall charge a small sum for commission. Nothing more—O dear, no! Have them cleaned up? Certainly, sir; and you may depend on their being sent home in time. At your convenience, Mr. Stanmore. No hurry, sir. You can write me your cheque for the amount.

Perhaps I'd better draw out a little memorandum. We shall make a mere nominal charge for cleaning."

Dick glanced over the memorandum, including its nominal charge for cleaning, which, perhaps from ignorance, did not strike him as being extraordinarily low. He was somewhat startled at the sum total, but when this gentleman made up his mind, it was not easy to turn him from an object in view.

The steppers, hardly cool, were hurried straight off to his bankers', to be driven, after their owner's interview with one of the partners, back again to the great emporium of their kind at Tattersall's.

A woman who wants to make a sacrifice parts with her jewels, a man sells his horses. Honour to each, for each offers up what is nearest and dearest to the heart.

Dick Stanmore lived no more within his income than other people. To get back these diamonds he would have to raise a considerable sum. There was nothing else to be done. The hunters must go: nay, the whole stud, phaeton-horses, hacks, and all. Yet Dick marched into the office to secure stalls for an early date, with a bright eye and a smiling face. He was proving, to *himself*, at least, how well he loved her.

The first person he met in the yard was Lord Bearwarden. That nobleman, though knowing him but slightly, had rather a liking for Stanmore, cemented by a certain good run they once saw in company, when each approved of the other's straightforward riding and unusual forbearance towards hounds.

"There's a nice horse in the boxes," said my lord; "looks very like your sort, Stanmore, and they say he'll go cheap, though he's quite sound."

"Thanks," answered Dick. "But I'm all the other way. Been taking stalls. Going to sell."

"Draft?" asked his lordship, who did not waste words.

"All of them," replied the other. "Even the hacks, saddlery, clothing, in short, the whole plant, and without reserve—going to give it up—at any rate for a time."

"Sorry for that," replied Bearwarden, adding, courteously, "Can I offer you a lift? I'm going your way.

Indeed, I'm going to call at your mother's. Shall I find the ladies at home?"

"A little later you will," said honest, unsuspecting Dick, who had not yet learned the lesson that teaches it is not worth while to trust or mistrust any of the sex. "They'll be charmed to give you some tea. I'm off to Croydon to look over my poor screws before they're sold, and break it to my groom."

"That's a right good fellow," thought Lord Bearwarden, "and not a bad connection if I was fool enough to marry the dark girl, after all." So he called out to Dick, who had one foot on the step of his phaeton—

"I say, Stanmore, come and dine with us on the 11th; we've got two or three hunting fellows, and we can go on together afterwards to your mother's ball."

"All right," said Stanmore, and bowled away in the direction of Croydon at the rate of fourteen miles an hour. If the horses were to be sold, people might just as well be made aware of the class of animal he kept. Though the sacrifice involved was considerable, it would be wise to lessen it by all judicious means in his power.

How great a sacrifice he scarcely felt till he arrived at his country stables.

Dick Stanmore had been fonder of hunting than any other pursuit in the world, ever since he went out for the first time on a Shetland pony, and came home with his nose bleeding, at five years old.

The spin and "whizz" of his reel, the rush of a brown mountain stream with its fringe of silver birch and stunted alder, the white side of a leaping salmon, and the gasp of that noble fish towed deftly into the shallows at last, afforded him a natural and unmixed pleasure. He loved the heather dearly, the wild hillside, the keen pure air, the steady setters, the flap and cackle of the rising grouse, the ringing shot that laid him low, born in the purple, and fated there to die. Nor, when corn-fields were cleared, and partridges, almost as swift as bullets and as numerous as locusts, were driven to and fro across the open, was his aim to be foiled by a flight little less rapid than the shot that arrested it. With a rifle in his hand, a general knowledge of the surrounding forest, and a couple of gillies, give

him the wind of a royal stag feeding amongst his hinds, and despite the feminine jealousy and instinctive vigilance of the latter, an hour's stalk would put the lord of the hills at the mercy of Dick Stanmore. In all these sports he was a proficient, from all of them he derived a keen gratification, but fox-hunting was his passion and his delight.

A fine rider, he loved the pursuit so well, and was so interested in hounds, that he gave his horse every opportunity of carrying him in front, and as his natural qualities included a good eye, and that confidence in the immediate future which we call "nerve," he was seen in difficulties less often than might be expected from his predilection in favour of "the shortest way."

His horses generally appeared to go pleasantly, and to reciprocate their rider's confidence, for he certainly seemed to get more work out of them than his neighbours.

As Mr. Crop, his stud-groom, remarked in the peculiar style of English affected by that trustworthy but exceedingly impracticable servant—

"Take and put him on a 'arf-bred' 'oss, an' he rides him like a hangel, nussin' of him, and coaxin' of him, and sendin' of him along, *beautiful* for ground, an' uncommon liberal for fences. Take an' put him on a thoro'-bred 'un, like our Vampire 'oss, and—Lor!"

One secret perhaps of that success in the hunting-field, which, when well mounted, even Mr. Crop's eloquence was powerless to express but by an interjection, lay in his master's affection for the animal. Dick Stanmore dearly loved a horse, as some men do love them, totally irrespective of any pleasure or advantage to be derived from their use.

There is a fanciful oriental legend which teaches that when Allah was engaged in the work of creation, he tempered the lightning with the south wind, and thus created the horse. Whimsical as is this idea, it yet suggests the swiftness, the fire, the mettlesome, generous, but plastic temperament of our favourite quadruped—the only one of our dumb servants in whose spirit we can rouse at will the utmost emulation, the keenest desire for the approval of its lord. Even the countenance of this animal denotes

most of the qualities we affect to esteem in the human race—courage, docility, good-temper, reflection (for few faces are so thoughtful as that of the horse), gratitude, benevolence, and, above all, trust. Yes, the full brown eye, large, and mild, and loving, expresses neither spite, nor suspicion, nor revenge. It turns on you with the mute unquestioning confidence of real affection, and you may depend on it under all pressure of circumstance, in the last extremity of danger or death. Will you say as much for the bluest eyes that ever sparkled in mirth, or swam in tears, or shone and deepened under the combined influence of triumph, belladonna, and war-paint?

I once heard a man affirm that for him there was in every horse's face the beauty each of us sees in the one woman he adores. This outrageous position he assumed after a good run, and, indeed, after the dinner which succeeded it. I will not go quite so far as to agree with him, but I will say that in generosity, temper, and fidelity, there is many a woman, and man too, who might well take example from the noble qualities of the horse.

And now Dick Stanmore was about to offer up half-a-dozen of these valued servants before the idol he had lately begun to worship, for whom, indeed, he esteemed no victim too precious, no sacrifice too dear.

Driving into his stable-yard, he threw the reins to a couple of helpers, and made use of Mr. Crop's arm to assist his descent. That worthy's face shone with delight. Next to his horses he loved his master—chiefly, it is fair to say, as an important ingredient without which there would be no stud.

"I was expectin' of ye, sir," said he, touching an exceedingly straight-brimmed hat. "Glad to see ye lookin' so well."

To do him justice, Mr. Crop did his duty as if he always *was* expecting his master.

"Horses all right?" asked Dick, moving towards the stable-door.

"'Osses *is* 'ealthy, I am thankful to say," replied the groom gravely, "and lookin', too, pretty nigh as I could wish, now they've done breakin' with their coats. There's Firetail got a queerish look—them Northamptonshire

'osses is mostly unsound ones—and the mare's off leg's filled; and the Vampire 'oss, he's got a bit of a splent a-comin', but I'll soon frighten that away; an' old Dandy-brush, he's awful, but not wuss nor I counted; and the young un——"

"I'll look 'em over," said Dick, interrupting what threatened to be a long catalogue. "I came down on purpose. The fact is (take those horses out and feed them)—the fact is, Crop, I'm going to sell them all. I'm going to send them up to Tattersall's."

Every groom is more or less a sporting man, and it is the peculiarity of sporting men to betray astonishment at no eventuality, however startling; therefore Mr. Crop, doing violence to his feelings, moved not a muscle of his countenance.

"I'm sorry to part with them, Crop," added Dick, a little put out by the silence of his retainer, and not knowing exactly what to say next. "They've carried me very well—I've seen a deal of fun on them—I don't suppose I shall ever have such good ones—I don't suppose I shall ever hunt much again."

Mr. Crop began to thaw. "They're *good* 'osses," he observed sententiously; "but that's not to say as there isn't good 'osses elsewheres. In regard of not huntin' there's a many seasons, askin' your pardon, atween you and me, and I should be sorry to think as I wasn't goin' huntin', ay, twenty years from now! When is 'em goin' up, sir?" added he, sinking sentiment and coming to business at once.

"Monday fortnight," answered Dick, entering a loose box, in which stood a remarkably handsome mare, that neighed at him, and rubbed her head against his breast.

"I should ha' liked another ten days," replied Crop, for it was an important part of his system never to accept his master's arrangements without a protest. "I could ha' got 'em to show as they ought to show by then. Is the stalls took?"

Dick nodded. He was looking wistfully at the mare, thinking what a light mouth she had, and how boldly she faced water.

"That leg 'll be as clean as my face in a week," ob-

served Mr. Crop confidently. "She'll fetch a good price, *she* will. Sir Frederic's after *her*, I know. There's nothing but tares in there, sir; old Dandybrush is in the box on the right."

Dick gave the mare a loving pat, and turned sadly into the residence of old Dandybrush.

That experienced animal greeted him with laid-back ears and a grin, as though to say, "Here you are again! But I like you best in your red coat."

They had seen many a good gallop together, and rolled over each other with the utmost good-humour, in every description of soil. To look at the old horse, even in his summer guise, was to recall the happiest moments of a sufficiently happy life.

"I'd meant to guv it *him* pretty sharp," said Crop; "but I'll let him alone now. He'd 'a carried you, maybe, another season or two, with a good strong dressin'; but them legs isn't what they *was*. Last time as I rode of him second horse, I found him different—gettin' inquisitive at his places—and when they gets inquisitive they soon begins to get slow. You'll look at the Vampire 'oss, sir, before you go back to town?"

Now "the Vampire 'oss," as he called him, was an especial favourite with Mr. Crop. Dick Stanmore had bought him out of training at Newmarket by his groom's advice, and the highbred animal, being ridden by an exceedingly good horseman, had turned out a far better hunter than common—not invariably the case with horses that begin life on the Heath. Crop took great pride in this purchase, confidently asserting, and doubtless believing, that England could not produce its equal.

He threw the box-door open with the air of a man who is going to exhibit a picture of his own painting.

"It's a pity to let him go," said the groom, with a sigh. "Where'll you get another as can touch him when the ground's deep, like it was last March? I've had a many to look after, first and last; but such a kind 'oss to do for in the stable I never see. Why, if you was to give that 'oss ten feeds of corn a day he'd take an' eat 'em all out clean—wouldn't leave a hoat! And legs. Them's not legs! them's slips of gutta-percher an' steel! To be sure

he'll fetch a hawful price at the 'ammer—four 'underd, five 'underd, I shouldn't wonder—why he's worth all the money to look at. Blessed if you mightn't ride a good 'ack to death only tryin' to find such another!"

Nevertheless, the Vampire horse was condemned to go up with the rest. Notwithstanding the truth of the groom's protestations, its money value was exactly the quality that decided the animal's fate.

Driving back to London, Dick's heart bounded to think that in an hour's time he should meet Miss Bruce again at dinner. How delightful to be doing all this for her sake, yet to keep the precious secret safe locked in his own breast, until the moment should come when it would be judicious to divulge it, making, at the same time, another confession, of which he hoped the result might be happiness for life.

"I'd do more than that for her," muttered this enthusiastic young gentleman, while he trotted over Vauxhall Bridge. "I liked my poor horses better than anything; and that's just the reason I like to part with them for her sake. My darling, I'd give you the heart out of my breast, even if I thought you'd tread it under foot and send it back again!"

Had such an anatomical absurdity been reconcilable with the structure of the human frame, it is possible Miss Bruce might have treated this important organ in the contumelious manner suggested.

CHAPTER XIII

SIXES AND SEVENS

In the meantime, while Dick Stanmore is hugging himself in the warm atmosphere of hope, while Lord Bearwarden hovers on the brink of a stream in which he narrowly escaped drowning long ago, while Tom Ryfe is plunged in depths of anxiety, jealousy, and humiliation that scorch like liquid fire, Miss Bruce's dark eyes, and winning, wilful ways, have kindled the torch of mistrust and discord between two people of whom she has rarely seen the one and never heard of the other.

Mr. Bargrave's chambers in Gray's Inn were at no time more remarkable for cleanliness than other like apartments in the same locality; but the dust lies inch-thick now in all places where dust *can* lie, because that Dorothea, more moping and tearful than ever, has not the heart to clean up, no, nor even to wash her own hands and face in the afternoon as heretofore.

She loves her "Jim," of course, all the more passionately that he makes her perfectly miserable, neglecting her for days together, and when they do meet, treating her with an indifference far more lacerating than any amount of cruelty or open scorn.

Not that he is always good-humoured. On the contrary, "Gentleman Jim," as they call him, has lost much of the rollicking, devil-may-care recklessness that earned his nickname, and is often morose now—sometimes even fierce and savage to brutality.

The poor woman has had a quarrel with him, not two

hours ago, originating, it is but fair to state, in her own extremely irritating conduct regarding beer, Jim being anxious to treat his ladye-love with that fluid for the purpose, as he said, of "drowning unkindness," and possibly with the further view of quenching an inconvenient curiosity she has lately indulged about his movements. No man likes to be watched; and the more reason the woman he is betraying has to doubt him, the less patience he shows for her anxiety, the less he tolerates her inquiries, her jealousy, or her reproaches.

Now Dorothea's suspicions, sharpened by affection have of late grown extremely wearisome, and Jim has been heard to threaten more than once that "if so be as she doesn't mend her manners, and live conformable, he'll take an' hook it, he will, blessed if he won't!"—a dark saying which sinks deeply and painfully into the forlorn one's heart. When, therefore, instead of drinking her share, as usual, of a foaming quart measure containing beer, dashed with something stronger, this poor thing set it down untasted, and forthwith began to cry, the cracksman's anger knew no bounds.

"Drop it!" he exclaimed brutally. "You'd best, I tell ye! D'ye think I want my blessed drink watered with your blessed nonsense? What's come to ye, ye contrairy devil? I thought I'd larned ye better. I'll see if I can't larn ye still. Would ye now!"

It was almost a blow,—such a push as is the next thing to actual violence, and it sent her staggering from the sloppy bar at which their altercation took place against a bench by the wall, where she sat down pale and gasping, to the indignation of a slatternly woman nursing her child, and the concern of an honest coalheaver, who had a virago of a wife at home.

"Easy, mate!" expostulated that worthy, putting his broad frame between the happy pair. "Hold on a bit, an' give her a drop when she comes to. She'd 'a throwed her arms about your neck a while ago, an' now she'd as soon knife ye as look at ye."

Wild-eyed and pale, Dorothea glared round, as Clytemnestra may have glared when her hand rested on the fatal axe; but this Holborn Agamemnon did not seem destined

to fall by a woman's blow, inasmuch as the tide was effectually turned by another woman's interference.

The slatternly lady, shouldering her child, as a soldier does his firelock, thrust herself eagerly forward.

"Knife him!" she exclaimed, with a most unfeminine execration. "I'd knife him, precious soon, if it was me, the blessed willen! To take an' use a woman like that there — a nasty, cowardly, sneakin,' ugly, tallow-faced beast!"

Had it not been for the imputation on his beauty, Dorothea might perhaps have blazed out in open rebellion, or remained passive in silent sulks; but to hear *her* Jim, the flash man of a dozen gin-shops, the beloved of a score of rivals, called "ugly," was more than flesh and blood could endure. She turned fiercely on her auxiliary and gave battle at once.

"And who arst *you* to interfere, mem, if I may venture to make the inquiry?" said she, with that polite but spasmodic intonation that denotes the approaching row. "Keep yerself *to* yerself, if you please, mem. And I'll thank ye not to go for to come between me and my young man, not till you've got a young man of your own, mem; and if you'd like to walk out, there's the door, mem, and don't you try for to give *me* none o' your sauce, for I'm not a-goin' to put up with it."

The slatternly woman ran her guns out and returned the broadside with promptitude.

"Door, indeed! you poor whey-faced drab, you dare to say the word door to *me*, a respectable woman, as Mister Tripes here knows me well, and have a score against me behind that there wery door as you disgraces, and as it's *you* as ought to be t'other side, you ought; for it's out of the streets as *you* come, well I knows, an' say another word, and I'll take that there bonnet off of your head, and chuck it into them streets and *you* arter it. O dear! O dear! that ever I should be spoke to like this here, and my master out o' work a month come Toosday, and this here gentleman standing by! But I'll set my mark on ye, if I get six months for it—I will!"

Thus speaking, or rather screaming, and brandishing her baby, as the gonfalonier waves his gonfalon, the slat-

ternly woman, swelling into a fury for the nonce, made a dive at Dorothea, which, but for the interposition of "this here gentleman," as she called the coalheaver, might have produced considerable mischief. That good man, however, took a deal of "weathering," as sailors say, and ere either of the combatants could get round his bulky person, the presence of a policeman at the door warned them that ordeal by battle had better be deferred till a more fitting opportunity. They burst into tears, therefore, simultaneously, and the dispute ended, as such disputes often do, in a general reconciliation, cemented by the consumption of much excisable fluid, some of it at the expense of the philanthropic coalheaver, whose simple faith involved a persuasion that the closest connection must always be preserved between good-fellowship and beer.

After these potations, it is not surprising that the slatternly woman should have found herself, baby and all, under the care of the civil power at a police-station, or that Gentleman Jim and his ladye-love should have adjourned to sober themselves in the steaming gallery of a playhouse.

Behold them, then, wedged into a front seat, Dorothea's bonnet hanging over the rail, Jim's gaudy handkerchief bulging with oranges, both spectators too absorbed in the action of the piece to realise its improbabilities, and the woman thoroughly identifying herself with the character and fortunes of its heroine.

The theatre is small, but the audience if not select are enthusiastic; the stage is narrow, but affords room for a deal of strutting and striding about on the part of an overpowering actor in the inevitable belt and boots of the melodramatic highwayman. The play represents certain startling passages in the career of one Claude Duval, formerly a running footman, afterwards—strange anomaly !—a robber on horseback, distinguished for polite manners and bold riding.

This remarkable person has a wife, devoted to him of course. In the English drama all wives are good; in the French all are bad, and people tell you that a play is the reflection of real life. Besides this dutiful spouse, he cherishes an attachment for a young lady of high birth and

aristocratic (stage) manners. She returns his tenderness, as it is extremely natural a young person so educated and brought up would return that of a criminal, who has made an impression on her heart by shooting her servants, rifling her trunks, and forcing her to dance a minuet with him on a deserted heath under a harvest moon.

This improbable incident affords a favourite scene, in which Dorothea's whole soul is absorbed, and to which Jim devotes an earnest attention, as of one who weighs the verisimilitude of an illustration, that he may accept the purport of the parable it conveys.

Dead servants (in profusion), struggling horses, the coach upset, and the harvest moon, are depicted in the back scene, which represents besides an illimitable heath, and a gibbet in the middle distance: all this under a glare of light, as indeed it might well be, for the moon is quite as large as the hind wheel of the coach.

In the foreground are grouped, the hero himself, a comic servant with a red nose and a fiddle, an open trunk, and a young lady in travelling costume, viz. white satin shoes, paste diamonds, ball-dress, and lace veil. The tips of her fingers rest in the gloved hand of her assailant, whose voice comes deep and mellow through the velvet mask he wears.

"My preservier!" says the lady, a little inconsequentially, while her fingers are lifted to the mask and saluted with such a smack as elicits a "hooray!" from some disrespectful urchin at the back of the pit.

"To presurrve beauty from the jeer of insult, the grasp of vie-olence is my duty and my prowfession. To adore it is my ree-ligion—and my fate!" replies the gallant highwayman, contriving with some address to retain his hold of the lady's hand, though encumbered by spurs, a sword, pistols, a mask, and an enormous three-cornered hat.

"And this man is proscribed, hunted, in danger, in disgrace!" exclaims the lady, aside, and therefore loud enough to be heard in the street. Claude Duval starts. The start of such an actor makes Dorothea jump. "Perdition!" he shouts, "ye have reminded me of what were well buried fathom-deep—obliterated—forgotten. Tr'you,

lady, 'tis ee-ven so! I have a compact with my followers —the ransom——"

"Shall be paid right willingly," she answers; and forthwith the comic servant with the red nose wakes into spasmodic life, winks repeatedly, and performs a flourish on his "property" fiddle, a little out of tune with the real instrument in the orchestra at his feet.

"What are they going to do?" asked Dorothea, in great anxiety.

"Hold your noise!" answers Jim, and the action of the piece progresses.

It is fortunate, perhaps, that minuets have gone out of fashion, if they involved such a test of endurance as that in which Claude Duval and his fair captive now disport themselves with an amount of bodily exertion it seems real cruelty to encore. His concluding caper shakes the mask from his partner's face, and the young lady falls, with a shriek, into his arms, leaving the audience in that happy state of perplexity, which so enhances the interest of a plot, as to whether her distress originates in excess of sentiment or deficiency of wind.

"It's beautiful!" whispers Dorothea, refreshing herself with an orange. "It 'minds me of the first time you and me ever met at Highbury Barn."

Jim grunts, but his grunt is not that of a contented sleeper, rather of one who is woke from a dream.

After a tableau like the last, it is natural that Claude Duval should find a certain want of excitement in the next scene, where he appears as a respectable householder in the apartments of his lawful spouse. This lady, leaving a cradle in the background, and advancing to the footlights, proceeds to hover round her husband, after the manner of stage wives, with neck protruded and arms spread out, like a woman who is a little afraid of a wasp or earwig, but wants to catch the creature all the same. He sits with his back to her, as nobody ever does sit but a stage husband at home, and punches the floor with his spur. It is strictly natural that she should sing a faint song with a slow movement on the spot.

It is perhaps yet more natural that this should provoke him exceedingly, so he jumps up, reaches a cupboard in

two strides, and pulls out of it his whole paraphernalia, sword, pistols, mask, three-cornered hat, everything but his horse. Then the wife, from her knees, informs all whom it may concern, that for the first time in their happy married life she has learned her husband is a robber, as they both call it, by "prowfession."

Dorothea's sympathies, womanlike, are with the wife. Jim, whose interest is centred in the young lady, finds this part of the performance rather wearisome, and thirsts, to use his own expression, for "a drain."

Events now succeed each other with startling rapidity. Claude Duval is seen at Ranelagh, still in his boots, where he makes fierce love to his young lady, and exchanges snuff-boxes (literally) with a duke. Next, in a thicket beset by thief-takers, from whom he escapes after prodigies of valour, aided by the comic servant, and thereafter guided by that singular domestic to a place of safety, which turns out to be the young lady's bedroom. Here Jim becomes much excited, fancying himself for the moment a booted hero, rings, laced-coat, Steinkirk handkerchief, and all. His dress touches that of his companion, but instinctively he moves from her as far as the crowded seat will permit, while Dorothea, all unconscious, looks lovingly in his face.

"She's a bold thing, and I can't abide her," is that lady's comment on the principal actress. "She ought to think shame of herself, she ought, acause of his wife at 'ome. But he's a good plucked 'un, isn't he, Jim? and lady or no lady, that goes a long way with a woman!"

Jim turned his head aside. Brutalised, besotted, depraved, there was yet in him a spark of that fire which lights men to their doom, and his eyes filled with tears.

But the thief-takers have Claude Duval by the throat at last; and there is a scene in court, where the young lady perjures herself unhesitatingly, and faints once more in the prisoner's arms. In vain. Claude Duval is sworn to, found guilty, condemned; and the stage is darkened for a grand finale.

Still gay, still gallant, still impenitent, and still booted, though in fetters, the highwayman sits in his prison cell, to be visited by the young lady, who cannot bear to lose her partner, and the wife, who still clings to her husband.

Unlike Macheath, he seems in no way embarrassed by the position. His wife forgives him, at this supreme moment, all the sorrow he has caused her, in consideration of some unexplained past, "gilded," as she expressed it, "by the sunny smiles of southern France," while the young lady, holding on with great tenacity to his hand, weeps frantically on her knees.

A clock strikes. It is the hour of execution. Dorothea begins to sob, and Gentleman Jim clenches his hands. The back of the stage opens to disclose a street, a crowd, a hangman, and the fatal Tyburn tree. Faint cheers are heard from the wings. The sheriff enters, bearing in his hand a reprieve, written apparently on a window-blind. He is attended by the comic servant, through whose mysterious agency a pardon has been granted, and who sticks by his fiddle to the last.

Grand tableau: Claude Duval penitent. His wife in his arms. The young lady conveying in dumb show how platonic has been her attachment, of which, nevertheless, she seems a little ashamed. The sheriff benignant; the turnkeys amused; the comic servant, obviously in liquor, brandishing his fiddlestick, and the orchestra playing "God save the Queen."

Walking home through the wet streets, under the flashing gaslights, Dorothea and her companion preserve an ominous silence. Both identify themselves with the fiction they have lately witnessed: the woman pondering on Mrs. Duval's sufferings and the eventful reward of that good lady's constancy and truth; her companion reflecting, not on the charms of the actress he has lately been applauding, but on another face which haunts him now, as the wilis and water-sprites haunted their doomed votaries, and which must ever be as far out of reach as if it belonged indeed to some such being of another nature; thinking how a man might well risk imprisonment, transportation, hanging, for one kind glance of those bright eyes, one smile of those haughty, scornful lips; and comparing in bitter impatience that exotic beauty with the humble, homely creature at his side.

She looks up in his face. "Jim," says she timidly, and cowering close to him the while, "if you was took, and

shopped, like him in the long boots, I'd go to quod with you, if they'd give me leave—I'd go to death with you, Jim, I would. I'd never forsake you, I wouldn't. I couldn't, dear,—not if it was ever so!"

He shudders and shrinks from her. "It might come sooner than you think for," says he, adding brutally enough, "now you *could* do me a turn in the witness-box, though I shouldn't wonder but you'd cut out white like the others. Let's call in here, and take a drop o' gin afore they shuts up."

The great picture of Thomas the Rhymer, and his Elfin Mistress, goes on apace. There is, I believe, but one representation in London of that celebrated prophet, and it is in the possession of his lineal descendant. Every feature, every shadow on that portrait has Simon Perkins studied with exceeding diligence and care, marvelling, it must be confessed, at the taste of the Fairy Queen. The accessories to his own composition are in rapid progress. Most of the fairies have been put in, and the gradual change from glamour to disillusion, cunningly conveyed by a stream of cold grey morning light entering the magic cavern from realms of upper earth, to deaden the glitter, pale the colouring, and strip, as it were, the tinsel where it strikes. On the Rhymer himself our artist has bestowed an infinity of pains, preserving (no easy task) some resemblance to the original portrait, while he dresses his conception in the manly form and comely features indispensable to the situation.

But it is into the fairy queen herself that Simon loves to throw all the power of his genius, all the resources of his art. To this labour of love, day after day, he returns with unabated zest, altering, improving, painting out, adding, taking away, drinking in the while his model's beauty, as parched and thirsty gardens of Egypt drink in the overflowing Nile, to return a tenfold harvest of verdure, luxuriance, and wealth.

She has been sitting to him for three consecutive hours. Truth to tell, she is tired to death of it—tired of the room, the palette, the easel, the queen, the rhymer, the little dusky imp in the corner, whose wings are

changing into scales and a tail, almost tired of dear Simon Perkins himself; who is working contentedly on (how can he?) as if life contained nothing more than effect and colouring—as if the reality were not better than the representation after all.

"A quarter of an inch more this way," says the preoccupied artist. "There is a touch wanting in that shadow under the eye—thanks, dear Nina. I shall get it at last," and he falls back a step to look at his work, with his head on one side, as nobody but a painter *can* look, so strangely does the expression of face combine impartial criticism with a satisfaction almost maternal in its intensity.

Before beginning again, his eye rested on his model, and he could not but mark the air of weariness and dejection she betrayed.

"Why, Nina," said he, "you look quite pale and tired. What a brute I am! I go painting on and forget how stupid it must be for you, who mustn't even turn your head to look at my work."

She gave a stretch, and such a yawn! Neither of them very graceful performances, had the lady been less fair and fascinating, but Nina looked exceedingly pretty in their perpetration nevertheless.

"Work," she answered. "Do you call that work? Why you've undone everything you did yesterday, and put about half of it in again. If you're diligent, and keep on at this pace, you'll finish triumphantly with a blank canvas, like Penthesilea and her tapestry in my ancient history."

"Penelope," corrected Simon gently.

"Well, Penelope! It's all the same. I don't suppose any of it's true. Let's have a peep, Simon. It can't be. Is that really like me?"

The colour had come back to her face, the light to her eye. She was pleased, flattered, half amused to find herself so beautiful. He looked from the picture to the original, and with all his enthusiasm for art awarded the palm to nature.

"It *was* like you a minute ago," said he, in his grave, gentle tones. "Or rather, I ought to say you were like

it. But you change so, that I am often in despair of catching you, and, somehow, I always seem to love the last expression best."

There was something in his voice so admiring, so reverential, and yet so tender, that she glanced quickly, with a kind of surprise, in his face; that face which to an older woman, who had known suffering and sorrow, might have been an index of the gentle heart, the noble, chivalrous character within, which, to this girl, was simply pale and worn, and not at all handsome, but very dear nevertheless, as belonging to her kind old Simon, the playmate of her childhood, the brother, and more than brother, of her youth.

Those encounters are sadly unequal, and very poor fun for the muffled fighter, in which one keeps the gloves on, while the other's blows are delivered with the naked fist.

Miss Algernon was at this time perhaps more attached to Simon Perkins than to any other creature in the world; that is to say, she did not happen to like anybody else better. How different from him, to whom she represented the very essence of that spiritual life which, in our several ways, we all try to live, which so few of us know how to attain by postponing its enjoyment for a few short troubled years.

It is probable that, if the painter had thrown down his brush at this juncture, and asked simply, "Nina, will you be my wife?" she would have answered, "Thank you kindly, yes, I will!" but although his judgment told him he was likely to succeed, his finer instincts warned him that an affirmative would be the sacrifice of her youth, her illusions, her possible future. Such sacrifice it was far more in Simon's nature to make than to accept.

"Will she ever know me thoroughly?" he used to think. "Will the time ever come when I can say to her, 'Nina, I am sure you care for me now, and therefore I am not afraid to tell you how dearly I loved you all through'? Such a time would be well worth waiting for, ay, though it never came for seven years, and seven more to the back of that. Then I should feel her happiness depended on mine. Now I often think the prince in the fairy tale will ride past our Putney villa some summer's day, like Launcelot

through the barley sheaves (I'll paint Launcelot when I've time, with the ripe ears reddened in the sun, and the light flashing off his harness), ride by and take Nina's heart away with him, and what will be left for me then? I could bear it! Yes, I could bear it if I knew she was happy. My darling, my darling! so that you walk on in joy and triumph, it matters little what becomes of me!"

The sentiment was perhaps overstrained. It is not thus that women are won. The fruit that drops into people's mouths is usually over-ripe, and the Sabine maiden would have thought less of her Roman lover, though doubtless she would have taken the initiative rather than miss him altogether, had it been necessary to pounce on him in the vineyard and desire him straightway to carry her home. But the bird of prey must have its natural victim, and such hearts as our poor generous painter possessed are destined for the talons and the beak. Ah! those who value them least win the great prizes in the lottery. Fortune smiles on the careless player—gold goes to the rich—streams run to the river, and if you have more mutton than you know what to do with, be sure that in your folds will be found the poor man's ewe-lamb. Put a ribbon round her neck, and be kind to her as *he* was. It is the least you can do!

"You've taken a deal of pains, Simon," says the sitter, after a long and well-pleased scrutiny. "Tell me, no flattery now, why should I be so difficult to paint?" Why, indeed, you saucy innocent coquette! Perhaps, because, all the while, you are turning the poor artist's head, and driving pins and needles into his heart.

"I *ought* to make a good likeness of you," answers Simon rather sadly. "I'm sure, Nina, I know your face by heart. But I'm determined to take enormous pains with this picture. It's to be my great work. I want them to admire it at the Academy. I want all London to come and look at it. I want the critics, who know nothing, to say it's well drawn; and the artists, who do know something, to say it's well treated; and the public to declare my fairy queen is the loveliest, and the sweetest, and the dearest face they ever beheld. You see I'm very —very—*ambitious*, Nina!"

"Yes, I suppose all painters are," replies Miss Algernon, with a little gasp of relief, accompanied by a little chill of something not quite unlike disappointment. "But you ought to be tired of working, and I know I am tired of sitting. Hand me my bonnet, Simon—not upside down—why that's the top where the rose is, of course! And let's walk back through the Park. It will be nearly full by this time."

So they walked back through the Park, and it *was* full—full to overflowing; nevertheless, amongst all the riders, drivers, sitters, strollers, and idlers, there appeared neither of the smart-looking gentlemen who had roused Nina's indignation by bowing to her in the morning without having the honour of her acquaintance.

CHAPTER XIV

THE OFFICERS' MESS

A GIGANTIC sentry of her Majesty's Household Cavalry paces up and down in front of the officers' quarters at Knightsbridge Barracks some two hours before watch-setting. It is fortunate that constant use has rendered him insensible to admiration. Few persons of either sex pass under his nose without a glance of unqualified approval. They marvel at his stature, his spurs, his carbine, his overalls, his plumed helmet, towering high above their heads, and the stupendous moustaches, on which this gentleman-private prides himself more than on all the rest of his heroic attributes put together.

Beyond a shade of disciplined weariness, there is no expression whatever on his handsome face, yet it is to be presumed that the man has his thoughts too, like another. Is he back in Cumberland amongst his dales, a stalwart stripling, fishing some lonely stream within the hills, watching a bout at "knurr-and-spell" across the heather, or wrestling a fall in friendly rivalry with his cousin, a son of Anak, tall as himself? Does that purple sunset over Kensington Gardens remind him of Glaramara and Saddleback? Does that distant roar of wheels in Piccadilly recall the rush and ripple of the Solway charging up its tawny sands with the white horses all abreast in a spring-tide?

Perhaps he is wishing he was an officer with no kit to keep in order, no fatigue-duty to undergo, sitting merrily down to as good a dinner as luxury can provide, or a guest,

of whom he has seen several pass his post in starched white neckcloths and trim evening clothes. Perhaps he would not change with any of these, after all, when he reflects on his own personal advantages, his social standing amongst his comrades, his keen appreciation and large consumption of beer and tobacco, with the innumerable conquests he makes amongst maids and matrons in the middle and lower ranks of life. Such considerations, however, impress themselves not the least upon his outward visage. A statue could not look more imperturbable, and he turns his head but very slightly, with supreme indifference, when peals of laughter, more joyous than common, are wafted through the open windows of the mess-room, where some of our friends have fairly embarked on that tide of good-humour and hilarity which sets in with the second glass of champagne.

It is a full mess; the colonel himself sits at dinner, with two or three friends, old brothers-in-arms, whose soldier-like bearing and manly faces betray their antecedents, though they may not have worn a uniform for months. A lately-joined cornet looks at these with a reverence that I am afraid could be extorted from him by no other institution on earth. The adjutant and riding-master, making holiday, are both present—"to the front," as they call it, enjoying exceedingly the jests and waggeries of their younger comrades. The orderly-officer, conspicuous by his belt, sits at one end of the long table. Lord Bearwarden occupies the other, supported on either side by his two guests, Tom Ryfe and Dick Stanmore. It is the night of Mrs. Stanmore's ball, and these last-named gentlemen are going there, with feelings how different, yet with the same object. Dick is full of confidence, elated and supremely happy. His entertainer experiences a quiet comfort and *bien-être* stealing over him, to which he has long been a stranger, while Tom Ryfe with every mouthful swallows down some emotion of jealousy, humiliation, or mistrust. Nevertheless, he is in the highest spirits of the three.

"I tell you nothing can touch him, my lord, when hounds run," says he, still harping on the merits of the horse he sold Lord Bearwarden in the Park. Of course

half the party are talking of hunting, the other half of racing, soldiering, and women. "He'd have been thrown away on most of the fellows we know. He wants a good man on his back, for if you keep him fiddling behind, it breaks his heart. I always said you ought to have him—you or Mr. Stanmore. He's just the sort for both of you. I'm sorry to hear yours are all coming up at Tattersall's," adds Tom, with a courteous bow to the opposite guest. "Hope it's only to make room for some more."

Dick disclaims. "No, indeed," says he, "it's a *bonâ fide* sale—without reserve, you know—I am going to give the thing up!"

"Give up hunting!" expostulates a very young subaltern on Dick's left. "Why, you're not a soldier, are you? What shall you do with yourself? You have nothing to live for."

Overcome by this reflection, he empties his glass and looks feelingly in his neighbour's face.

"Are you so fond of it too?" asks Dick with a smile.

"Fond of it! I believe you!" answers the boy. "What is there to be compared to it?—at least that I've tried, you know. I think the happiest fellow on earth is a master of fox-hounds, particularly if he hunts them himself: there's only one thing to beat it, and that's soldiering. I'd rather command such a regiment as this than be Emperor of China. Perhaps I shall, too, some day."

The real colonel, sitting opposite, overhears this military sentiment, and smiles good-humouredly at his zealous junior. "When you *are* in command," says he, "I hope you'll be down upon the cornets—they want a deal of looking up—I'm much too easy with them." The young soldier laughed and blushed. In his heart he thought the "chief," as he called him, the very greatest man in the world, offering him that respect combined with affection which goes so far to constitute the efficiency of a regiment, hoping hereafter to tread in his footsteps and carry out his system.

For ten whole minutes he held his tongue—and this was no small effort of self-restraint—that he might listen to the commanding officer's conversation with his guests, savouring strongly of professional interests, as comprising

Crimean, Indian, and continental experiences, all tending to prove that cavalry massed, kept under cover, held well in hand, and "offered" at the critical moment, was *the* force to render success permanent and defeat irretrievable.

When they got into a dissertation on shoeing, with the comparative merits of "threes" and "sections" at drill, the young man refreshed himself liberally with champagne, and turned to more congenial discourse.

Of this there seemed no lack. The winner of the St. Leger was as confidently predicted as if the race were already in his owner's pocket. A match was made between two splendid dandies, called respectfully by their comrades "Nobby" and "The Dustman," to walk from Knightsbridge Barracks to Windsor Bridge that day week —the odds being slightly in favour of "The Dustman," who was a peer of the realm. A moderate dancer was freely criticised, an exquisite singer approved with reservation, and the style of fighting practised by our present champion of the prize-ring unequivocally condemned. Presently a deep voice made itself heard in more sustained tones than belong to general conversation, and during a lull it became clear that the adjutant was relating an anecdote of his own military experience. "It's a wonderful country," said he, in reply to some previous observation. "I'm not an Irishman myself, but I've observed that the most conspicuous men in all nations are pure Irish or of Irish extraction. Look at the service. Look at the ring—prize-fighters and book-makers. I believe the Slasher's mother was born in Connaught, and nothing will convince me but that Deerfoot came from Tipperary—east and west the world's full of them—they swarm, I'm told, in America, and I can answer for them in Europe. Did ye ever see a Turk in a vineyard? He's the very moral of Pat in a potato-garden: the same frieze coat—the same baggy breeches—the same occasional smoke, every five minutes or so—and the same rooted aversion to hard work. Go on into India—they're all over the place. Shall I tell you what happened to myself? We were engaged on the right of the army, getting it hot and heavy, all the horses with their heads up, but the men as steady as old Time. I was in the Lancers then, under

Sir Hope. The Sikhs worked their guns beautifully, and presently we got the word to advance. It wasn't bad ground for manœuvring, and we were soon into them. The enemy fought a good one—those Sikhs always do. There was one fine old white-bearded patriarch stuck to his gun to the last. His people were all speared and cut down, but he never gave back an inch. I can see him now, looking like the pictures of Abraham in my old Sunday-school book. I thought I'd save him if I could. Our chaps had got their blood up, and dashed in to finish him with their lances, but I kept them off with some difficulty, and offered him 'quarter.' I was afraid he wouldn't understand my language. 'Quarter,' says he, in the richest brogue you'll hear out of Cork—'quarter! you bloody thieves! will you stick a countryman, an' a comrade, ye murtherin' villains, like a *boneen* in a butcher's shop!' He'd have gone on, I dare say, for an hour, but the men had their lances through him before you could say 'knife.' As my right-of-threes, himself a Paddy, observed—he was discoorsin' the devil in less than five minutes. The man was a deserter and a renegade, so it served him right, but being an Irishman, you see, he distinguished himself—that's all I mean to infer."

The young officer was exceedingly attentive to an anecdote which, thus told by its bronzed, war-worn, and soldier-like narrator, possessed the fascination of romance with the interest of reality.

Lord Bearwarden and his guests had also broken off their conversation to listen—they returned to the previous subject.

"There are so many people come to town now-a-days," said his lordship, "that the whole thing spoils itself. Society is broken up into sets, and even if you belong to the same set, you cannot insure meeting any particular person at any particular place. Just the same with clubs. I might hunt you two fellows about all night, from Arthur's to the Arlington—from the Arlington to White's—from White's to the Carlton—from the Carlton back to St. James's Street—and never run into you at all, unless I had the luck to find you drinking gin and soda at Pratt's."

Tom Ryfe, belonging only to the last-named of these resorts, looked gratified. Dick Stanmore was thinking of something else.

"Now, to-night," continued Lord Bearwarden, turning to the latter, "although the ball is in your own step-mother's house, I'll take odds you don't know three-fourths of the people you'll meet, and yet you've been as much about London as most of us. Where they come from I can't think, and they're like the swallows, or the storks, or the woodcocks, only they're not so welcome. Where they'll go to when the season's over I neither know nor care."

Tom Ryfe would have given much to feel equally indifferent. Something like a pang shot through him as he reflected that for him the battle must be against wind and tide—a fierce struggle, more and more hopeless, to grasp at something drifting visibly out of reach. He was not a man, however, to be beat while it was possible to persist. Believing Dick Stanmore the great obstacle in his way, he watched that preoccupied gentleman as a cat watches a mouse.

"I don't want to be introduced to any more people," said Dick rather absently. "In my opinion you can't have too few acquaintances and too many friends."

"One ought to know lots of *women*," said Mr. Ryfe, assuming the air of a fine gentleman, which fitted him, thought Lord Bearwarden, as ill as his uniform generally fits a civilian. "I mean women of position—who *give* things—whom you'd like to be seen talking to in the Park. As for girls, they're a bore—there's a fresh crop every season—they're exactly like each other, and you have to dance with 'em all!"

"Confound his impudence!" *thought* Lord Bearwarden; "does he hope to impose on *me* with his half-bred swagger and Brummagem assurance?" but he only *said*, "I suppose, Tom, you're in great request with them—all ranks, all sorts, all ages! You fellows have such a pull over us poor soldiers; you can be improving the time while we're on guard."

Tom looked as if he rather believed he could. But he only *looked* it. Beneath that confident manner, his heart

was sad and sinking. How bitter he felt against Miss Bruce, and yet he loved her, in his own way, too, all the while.

"Champagne to Mr. Stanmore!" said his entertainer, beckoning to a servant. "You're below the mark, Stanmore, and we've a heavy night before us. You're thinking of your pets at Tattersall's next week. Cheer up. Their future masters won't be half so hard on them, I'll be bound. But I wouldn't assist at the sacrifice if I were you. Come down to the Den with me; we'll troll for pike, and give the clods a cricket-match. Then we'll dine early, set trimmers, and console ourselves with claret-cup under affliction."

Dick laughed. Affliction, indeed, and he had never been so happy in his life! Perhaps that was the reason of his silence, his abstraction. At this very moment, he thought, Maud might be opening the packet he made such sacrifices to redeem. He had arranged for her to receive the diamonds all reset and glittering at the hour she would be dressing for the ball. He could almost fancy he saw the beautiful face flushed with delight, the dark eyes filled with tears. Would she press those jewels to her lips, and murmur broken words of endearment for *him?* Would she not love him *now*, if, indeed, she had not loved him before? Horses, forsooth! What were all the horses that ever galloped compared to one smile of hers? He would have given her his right arm, his life, if she wanted it. And now, perhaps, he was to obtain his reward. Who could tell what that very night might bring forth?

Mr. Stanmore's glass remained untasted before him, and Lord Bearwarden observing that dinner was over, and his guests seemed disinclined to drink any more wine, proposed an adjournment to the little mess-room to smoke.

In these days the long sittings that delighted our grandfathers have completely given way to an early break up, a quiet cigar, and a general retreat, if not to bed, at least to other scenes and other society. In ten minutes from the rising of the colonel, Lord Bearwarden, and half-a-dozen guests, the larger mess-room was cleared of its

inmates, and the smaller one crowded with an exceedingly merry and rather noisy assemblage.

"Just one cigar," said Lord Bearwarden, handing a huge case to his friends. "It will steady you nicely for waltzing, and some eau-de-cologne in my room will take off all the smell afterwards. I know you dancing swells are very particular."

Both gentlemen laughed, and putting large cigars into their mouths, accommodated themselves with exceeding goodwill to the arrangement. It was not in the nature of things that silence should be preserved under such incentives to conversation as tobacco and soda-water with something in it, but presently, above other sounds, a young voice was heard to clamour for a song.

"Let's have a chant!" protested this eager voice; "the night is still young. We're all musical, and we don't often get the two best pipes in the regiment to dine here the same day. Come, tune up, old boy. Give us 'Twisting Jane,' or the 'Gallant Young Hussar.'"

The "old boy" addressed, a large, fine-looking man, holding the appointment of riding-master, smiled good-humouredly, and shook his head. "It's too early for the 'Hussar,'" said he, scanning the fresh beardless face with its clear mirthful eyes. "And it's not an improving song for young officers neither. I'll try 'Twisting Jane' if you gentlemen will support me with the chorus;" and in a deep mellow voice he embarked without more ado on the following barrack-room ditty:—

"I loved a girl, down Windsor way,
When we was lying there,
As soft as silk, as mild as May,
As timid as a hare.
She blushed and smiled, looked down so shy,
And then—looked up again—
My comrades warned me: 'Mind your eye,
With Twisting Jane!'

I wooed her thus, not sure but slow,
To kiss she vowed a crime,—
For she was 'reining back,' you know,
While I was 'marking time.'

'Alas!' I thought, 'these dainty charms
Are not for me, 'tis plain;
Too long she keeps me under arms,
Does Twisting Jane.'

Our corporal-major says to me,
One day before parade,
'She's gammoning you, young chap,' says he,
'Is that there artful jade!
You'll not be long of finding out,
When nothing's left to gain,
How quick the word is "Threes about!"
With Twisting Jane!'

Our corporal-major knows what's what;
I peeped above her blind;
The tea was made—the toast was hot—
She looked so sweet and kind.
My captain in her parlour sat,
It gave me quite a pain,
With coloured clothes, and shining hat,
By Twisting Jane.

The major he came cantering past,
She bustled out to see,—
'O, major! is it you at last?
Step in and take your tea.'
The major halted—winked his eye—
Looked up and down the lane;
And in he went his luck to try
With Twisting Jane.

I waited at 'attention' there,
Thinks I, 'There'll soon be more.'
The colonel's phaeton and pair
Came grinding to the door.
She gave him such a sugary smile,
(Old men is very vain!)
'It's you I looked for all the while,'
Says Twisting Jane.

'I've done with you for good,' I cried,
'You're never on the square;
Fight which you please on either side,
But hang it, lass, fight fair!
I won't be last—I can't be first—
So look for me in vain
When next you're out "upon the burst,"
Miss Twisting Jane!—
When next you're out "upon the burst,"
Miss Twisting Jane!'"

"A jolly good song," cried the affable young gentleman who had instigated the effort, adding, with a quaint glance at the grizzled visage and towering proportions of the singer, "You're very much improved, old chap—not so shy, more power, more volume. If you mind your music, I'll get you a place as a chorister-boy in the Chapel Royal, after all. You're just the size, and your manner's the very thing!"

"Wait till I get *you* in the school with that new charger," answered the other, laughing. "I think, gentlemen, it's my call. I'll ask our adjutant here to give us 'Boots and Saddles,' you all like that game."

Tumblers were arrested in mid-air, cigars taken from smooth or hairy lips, while all eyes were turned towards the adjutant, a soldier down to his spurs, who "tuned up," as universally requested, without delay.

BOOTS AND SADDLES.

"The ring of a bridle, the stamp of a hoof,
Stars above, and a wind in the tree,—
A bush for a billet,—a rock for a roof,—
Outpost duty's the duty for me!
Listen. A stir in the valley below—
The valley below is with riflemen crammed,
Covering the column and watching the foe—
Trumpet-major!—Sound and be d——d!
Stand to your horses!—It's time to begin—
Boots and Saddles! The Pickets are in!

Though our bivouac-fire has smouldered away,
Yet a bit of good 'baccy shall comfort us well;
When you sleep in your cloak there's no lodging to pay,
And where we shall breakfast the devil can tell!
But the horses were fed, ere the daylight had gone,
There's a slice in the embers—a drop in the can—
Take a suck of it, comrade! and so pass it on,
For a ration of brandy puts heart in a man.
Good liquor is scarce, and to waste it a sin,—
Boots and Saddles! The Pickets are in!

Hark! there's a shot from the crest of the hill!
Look! there's a rocket leaps high in the air.
By the beat of his gallop, that's nearing us still,
That runaway horse has no rider, I'll swear!

There's a jolly light-infantry post on the right,
I hear their bugles—they sound the 'Advance.'
They will tip us a tune that shall wake up the night,
And we're hardly the lads to leave out of the dance.
They're at it already, I'm sure, by the din,—
Boots and Saddles! The Pickets are in!

They don't give us long our divisions to prove—
Short, sharp, and distinct, comes the word of command.
'Have your men in the saddle—Be ready to move—
Keep the squadron together—the horses in hand—'
While a whisper's caught up in the ranks as they form—
A whisper that fain would break out in a cheer—
How the foe is in force, how the work will be warm.
But, steady! the chief gallops up from the rear.
With old 'Death-or-Glory' to fight is to win,
And the Colonel means mischief, I see by his grin.—
Boots and Saddles! The Pickets are in!—
Boots and Saddles! The Pickets are in!"

"And it must be 'Boots and Saddles' with us," said Lord Bearwarden to his guests as the applause subsided and he made a move towards the door, "otherwise we shall be the 'lads to leave out of the dance'; and I fancy that would suit none of us to-night."

CHAPTER XV

MRS. STANMORE AT HOME.

DANCING.

Amongst all the magnificent toilettes composed to do honour to the lady whose card of invitation heads this chapter, none appeared more variegated in colour, more startling in effect, than that of Miss Puckers the maid.

True, circumstances compelled her to wear a high dress, but even this modest style of costume in the hands of a real artist admits of marvellous combinations and extraordinary breadth of treatment. Miss Puckers had disposed about her person as much ribbon, tulle, and cheap jewelry as might have fitted out a fancy fair. Presiding in a little breakfast-room off the hall, pinning tickets on short red cloaks, shaking out skirts of wondrous fabrication, and otherwise assisting those beautiful guests who constituted the entertainment, she afforded a sight only equalled by her after-performances in the tea-room, where, assuming the leadership of a body of handmaidens almost as smart as herself, she formed, for several waggish and irreverent young gentlemen, a principal attraction in that favourite place of resort.

A ball is so far like a run with fox-hounds that it is difficult to specify the precise moment at which the sport begins. Its votaries gather by twos and threes attired for

pursuit; there is a certain amount of refitting practised, as regards dress and appointments, while some of the keenest in the chase are nevertheless the latest arrivals at the place of meeting. Presently are heard a note or two, a faint flourish, a suggestive prelude. Three or four couples get cautiously to work, the music swells, the pace increases, ere long the excitement extends to all within sight or hearing, and a performance of exceeding speed, spirit, and severity is the result.

Puckers, with her mouth full of pins, is rearranging the dress of a young lady in her first season, to whom, as to the inexperienced hunter, that burst of music is simply maddening. She is a well-bred young lady, however, and keeps her raptures to herself, but is slightly indignant at the very small notice taken of her by Dick Stanmore, who rushes into the tiring-room, drops a flurried little bow, and hurries Puckers off into a corner, totally regardless of the displeasure with which a calm, cold-looking chaperon regards this unusual proceeding.

"Did it come in time?" says Dick in a loud agitated whisper. "Did you run up with it directly? Was she pleased? Did she say anything? Has she got them on now?"

"Lor, Mr. Stanmore!" exclaims Puckers; "whatever do you mean?"

"Miss Bruce—the diamonds," explains Dick, in a voice that causes two dandies, recently arrived, to pause in astonishment on the staircase.

"O, the diamonds!" answers Puckers. "Only think, now. Was it *you,* sir? Well, I never. Why, sir, when Miss Bruce opens the packet, not half-an-hour ago, the tears comes into her eyes, and she says, 'Well, this *is* kind'—them was her very words—'this *is* kind,' says she, and pops 'em on that moment; for I'd done her hair and all. Go up-stairs, Mr. Stanmore, and see how she looks in them. I'll wager she's waiting for Somebody to dance with her this very minute!"

Though it is too often of sadly short duration, every man *has* his "good time" for a few blissful seconds during life. Let him not complain they are so brief. It is something to have at least tasted the cup, and perhaps it is

better to turn with writhing lips from the bitter drop near the brim than, drinking it fairly out, to find its sweets pall on the palate, its essence cease to warm the heart and stimulate the brain.

Dick, hurrying past his mother into the soft, mellow, yet brilliant radiance of her crowded ball-room, felt for that moment the happiest man in London.

Miss Bruce was *not* waiting to dance with him, according to her maid's prediction, but was performing a waltz in exceeding gravity, assisted, as Dick could not help observing, with a certain satisfaction, by the ugliest man in the room. The look she gave him when their eyes met at last sent this shortsighted young gentleman up to the seventh heaven. It seemed well worth all the hunters in Leicestershire, all the diamonds in Golconda! He did the honours of his step-mother's house, and thanked his own friends for coming, but all with the vague consciousness of a man in a dream. Presently the "round" dance came to an end, much to the relief of the ugly man, who cared, indeed, for ladies as little as ladies cared for him; and Dick hastened to secure Miss Bruce as a partner for the approaching "square." She was engaged, of course, six deep, but she put off all her claimants and took Mr. Stanmore's arm. "He's my cousin, you know," said she, with her rare smile, "and cousins don't count; so you're all merely put back *one*. If you don't like it, you needn't come for it—*c'est tout simple!*"

Then they took their places, and the dark eyes looked full into his own. Dick felt he was winning in a canter.

Miss Bruce put her hand on the collar of diamonds round her neck. "I'm glad you're *not* my cousin," she said; "I'm glad you're not *really* a relation. You're far dearer as it is. You're the best friend and truest gentleman I ever met in my life. Now I sha'n't thank you any more. Mind your dancing, and set to that gawky woman opposite. Isn't she badly dressed?"

How could Dick tell? He didn't even know he had a *vis-à-vis*, and the "gawky woman," as Miss Bruce most unjustly called her, only wondered anybody could make such blunders in so simple a figure as the *Été*. His head was in a whirl. A certain chivalrous instinct warned him

that this was no time, while his idol lay under a heavy obligation, to press his suit. Yet he could not, for the life of him, help venturing a word.

"I look at nobody but you," he answered, turning pale as men do when they are in sad earnest. "I should never wish to see any other face than yours for the rest of my life."

"How tired you'd get of it," said she, with a bright smile; but she timed her reply so as to embark immediately afterwards on the *Chaîne des Dames*, a measure exceedingly ill calculated for sustained conversation, and changed the subject directly she returned to his side.

"Where did you dine?" she asked saucily. "With those wild young men at the barracks, I suppose. I knew you would: and you did all sorts of horrid things, drank and smoked—I'm *sure* you smoked." She put her laced handkerchief laughingly to her nose.

"I dined with Bearwarden," answered honest Dick, "and he's coming on here directly with a lot of them. My mother will be so pleased—it's going to be a capital ball."

"I thought Lord Bearwarden never went to balls," replied the young lady carelessly; but her heart swelled with gratified vanity to think of the attraction that drew him now to every place where he could hear her voice and look upon her beauty.

"There he is," was her partner's comment, as his lordship's head appeared in the doorway. "We'll have one more dance, Miss Bruce—Maud—before the night is over?"

"As many as you please," was her answer, and still Dick felt he had the race in hand and was winning in a canter.

People go to balls for pleasure, no doubt, but it must be admitted, nevertheless, that the pleasure they seek there is of a delusive kind and lasts but for a few minutes at a time.

Mr. Stanmore's whole happiness was centred in Miss Bruce, yet it was impossible for him to neglect all his stepmother's guests because of his infatuation for one, nor would the usages of society's Draconic laws, that are not

to be broken, permit him to haunt that one presence, which turned to magic a scene otherwise only ludicrous for an hour or so, and simply wearisome as it went on.

So Dick plunged into the thick of it, and did his duty manfully, diving at partners right and left, yet, with a certain characteristic loyalty, selecting the least attractive amongst the ladies for his attentions. Thus it happened that as the rooms became crowded, and half the smartest people in London surged and swayed upon the staircase, he lost sight of the face he loved for a considerable period, and was able to devote much real energy to the success of his step-mother's ball, uninfluenced by the distraction of Miss Bruce's presence.

This young lady's movements, however, were not unobserved. Puckers, from her position behind the cups and saucers, enjoyed great reconnoitring opportunities, which she did not suffer to escape unimproved—the tea-room, she was aware, held an important place in the working machinery of society, as a sort of neutral territory, between the cold civilities of the ball-room and the warmer interests fostered by juxtaposition in the boudoir, not to mention a wicked little alcove beyond, with low red velvet seats, and a subdued light suggestive of whispers and provoking question rather than reply.

Puckers was not easily surprised. In the housekeeper's room she often thanked her stars for this desirable immunity, and indeed on the present occasion had furnished a loving couple with tea, whose united ages would have come hard upon a century, without moving a muscle of her countenance, albeit there was something ludicrous to general society in the affectation of concealment with which this long-recognised attachment had to be carried on. The gentleman was bald and corpulent. The lady—well, the lady had been a beauty thirty years ago, and dressed the character still. There was nothing to prevent their seeing each other every day and all day long, if they chose, yet they preferred scheming for invitation to the same places, that they might meet *en évidence* before the public; and dearly loved, as now, a retirement into the tea-room, where they could enact their *rôle* of turtle-doves, uninterrupted, yet not entirely unobserved.

Perhaps, after all, this imaginary restraint afforded the little spice of romance that preserved their attachment from decay.

Puckers, I say, marvelled at these not at all, but she did marvel, and admitted it, when Miss Bruce, entering the tea-room, was seen to be attended, not by Mr. Stanmore, but by Lord Bearwarden.

Her dark eyes glittered, and there was an exceedingly becoming flush on the girl's fair face, usually so pale. Her maid thought she had never seen Maud look so beautiful, and to judge by the expression of his countenance, it would appear Lord Bearwarden thought so too. They had been dancing together, and he seemed to be urging her to dance with him again. His lordship's manner was more eager than common, and in his eyes came an anxious expression that only one woman, the one woman it was so difficult to forget, had ever been able to call into them before.

"Look odd!" he repeated, while he set down her cup and gave her back the fan he had been holding. "I thought you were above all that, Miss Bruce, and did what you liked, without respect to the fools who stare and can't understand."

She drew up her head with a proud gesture peculiar to her. "How do you know I do like it?" said she haughtily.

He looked hurt, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Forgive me," he said, "I have no right to suppose it. I have been presumptuous, and you are entitled to be unkind. I have monopolised you too much, and you're—you're bored with me. It's my own fault."

"I never said so," she answered in the same tone; "who is unkind now?" Then the dark eyes were raised for one moment to look full in his, and it was all over with Lord Bearwarden.

"You will dance with me again before I go," said he, recovering his former position with an alacrity that denoted some previous practice. "I shall ask nobody else—why should I? You know I only came here to see *you*. One waltz, Miss Bruce—promise?"

"I promise," she answered, and again came into her

eyes that smile which so fascinated her admirers to their cost. "I shall get into horrid disgrace for it, and so I shall for sitting here so long now. I'm always doing wrong. However, I'll risk it if you will."

Her manner was playful, almost tender; and Puckers, adding another large infusion of tea, wondered to see her look so soft and kind.

A crowded waltz was in course of performance, and the tea-room, but for this preoccupied couple, would have been empty. Two men looked in as they passed the door, the one hurried on in search of his partner, the other started, scowled, and turned back amongst the crowd. Puckers, the lynx-eyed, observing and recognising both, had sufficient skill in physiognomy to pity Mr. Stanmore and much mistrust Tom Ryfe.

The former, indeed, felt a sharp, keen pang, when he saw the face that so haunted him in close proximity to another face belonging to one who, if he should enter for the prize, could not but prove a dangerous rival. Nevertheless, the man's generous instincts stifled and kept down so unworthy a suspicion, forcing himself to argue against his own conviction that, at this very moment, the happiness of his life was hanging by a thread. He resolved to ignore everything of the kind. Jealousy was a bad beginning for a lover, and after all, if he should allow himself to be jealous of every man who admired and danced with Maud, life would be unbearable. How despicable, besides, would she hold such a sentiment! With her disposition, how would she resent anything like *espionage* or *surveillance!* How unworthy it seemed both of herself and of him! In two minutes he was heartily ashamed of his momentary discomfiture, and plunged energetically once more into the duties of the ball-room. Nevertheless, from that moment, the whole happiness of the evening had faded out for Dick.

There is a light irradiating all such gatherings which is totally irrespective of gas or wax-candles. It can shed a mellow lustre on dingy rooms, frayed carpets, and shabby furniture; nay, I have seen its tender rays impart a rare and spiritual beauty to an old, worn, long-loved face; but on the other hand, when this magic light is quenched, or

even temporarily shaded, not all the illuminations of a royal birthday are brilliant enough to dispel the gloom its absence leaves about the heart.

Mr. Stanmore, though whirling a very handsome young lady through a waltz, began to think it was not such a good ball after all.

Tom Ryfe, on the other hand, congratulated himself on his tactics in having obtained an invitation, not without considerable pressure put upon Miss Bruce, for a gathering of which his social standing hardly entitled him to form a part. He was now, so to speak, on the very ground occupied by the enemy, and though he saw defeat imminent, could at least make his own effort to avert it. After all his misgivings as regarded Stanmore, it seemed that he had been mistaken, and that Lord Bearwarden was the rival he ought to dread. In any case but his own, Mr. Ryfe was a man of the world, quite shrewd enough to have reasoned that in this duality of admirers there was encouragement and hope. But Tom had lost his heart, such as it was; and his head, though of much better material, had naturally gone with it. Like other gamblers, he determined to follow his ill-luck to the utmost, bring matters to a crisis, and so know the worst. In all graver affairs of life, it is doubtless good sense to look a difficulty in the face; but in the amusements of love and play practised hands leave a considerable margin for that uncertainty which constitutes the very essence of both pastimes; and this is why, perhaps, the man in earnest has the worst chance of winning at either game.

So Tom Ryfe turned back into the crowd, and waited his opportunity for a few minutes' conversation with Miss Bruce.

It came at last. She had danced through several engagements, the night was waning, and a few carriages had already been called up. Maud occupied the extreme end of a bench, from which a party of ladies had just risen to go away: she had declined to dance, and for the moment was alone. Tom slipped into the vacant seat by her side, and thus cut her off from the whole surrounding world. A waltz requiring much terrific accompaniment of brass instruments pealed out its deafening strains within

ten feet of them, and in no desert island could there have been less likelihood that their conversation would be overheard.

Miss Bruce looked very happy, and in thorough good-humour. Tom Ryfe opened the trenches quietly enough.

"You haven't danced with me the whole evening," said he, with only rather a bitter inflection of voice.

"You never asked me," was the natural rejoinder.

"And I'm not going to ask you, now," proceeded Mr. Ryfe; "you and I, Miss Bruce, have something more than a mere dancing acquaintance, I think."

An impatient movement, a slight curl of the lip, was the only answer.

"You may drop an acquaintance when you are tired of him, or a friend when he gets troublesome. It's done every day. It's very easy, Miss Bruce."

He spoke in a tone of irony that roused her.

"Not so easy," she answered, with tightening lips, "when people have no tact—when they are not *gentlemen*."

The taunt went home. The beauty of Mr. Ryfe's face was at no time in its expression—certainly not now. Miss Bruce, too, seemed well disposed to fight it out. Obviously it must be war to the knife!

"Did you get my letter?" said he, in low, distinct syllables. "Do you believe I mean what I say? Do you believe I mean what I *write?*"

She smiled scornfully. A panting couple who stopped just in front of them imagined they were interrupting a flirtation, and, doing as they would be done by, twirled on.

"I treat all begging-letters alike," answered Maud, "and make yours no exception, because they contain threats and abuse into the bargain. You have chosen the wrong person to try and frighten, Mr. Ryfe. It only shows how little you understand my character."

He would have caught at a straw even then. "How little chance I have had of studying it!" he exclaimed. "It is not my fault. Heaven knows I have been kept in ignorance, uncertainty, suspense, till it almost drove me mad. Miss Bruce, you have known the worst of me; only the worst of me, indeed, as yet."

The man was pleading for his life, you see. Was it

pitiable, or only ludicrous, that his voice and manner had to be toned down to the staid pitch of general conversation, that a fat and happy German was puffing at a cornet-à-piston within arm's length of him? But for a quiver of his lip, any bystander might have supposed he was asking Miss Bruce if he should bring her an ice.

"I have seen enough!" she replied, very resolutely, "and I am determined to see no more. Mr. Ryfe, if you have no pleasanter subjects of conversation than yourself and your arrangements, I will ask you to move for an instant that I may pass and find Mrs. Stanmore."

Lord Bearwarden was at the other end of the room, looking about apparently for some object of unusual interest. Perhaps Miss Bruce saw him—as ladies do see people without turning their eyes—and the sight fortified her resolution.

"Then you defy me!" whispered Tom, in the low suppressed notes that denote rage, concentrated and intensified for being kept down. "By heaven, Miss Bruce, you shall repent it! I'll show you up! I'll expose you! I'll have neither pity nor remorse! You think you've won a heavy stake, do you? Hooked a big fish, and need only pull him ashore? *He* sha'n't be deceived! *He* shall know you for what you are! He shall, by ——!"

The adjuration with which Mr. Ryfe concluded this little ebullition was fortunately drowned to all ears but those for which it was intended by a startling flourish on the cornet-à-piston. Miss Bruce accepted the challenge readily. "Do your worst!" said she, rising with a scornful bow, and taking Lord Bearwarden's arm, much to that gentleman's delight, walked haughtily away.

Perhaps this declaration of open war may have decided her subsequent conduct; perhaps it was only the result of those circumstances which form the meshes of a certain web we call Fate. Howbeit, Miss Bruce was too tired to dance. Miss Bruce would like to sit down in a cool place. Miss Bruce would not be bored with Lord Bearwarden's companionship, not for an hour, not for a week—no, not for a lifetime!

Dick Stanmore, taking a lady down to her carriage, saw them sitting alone in the tea-room, now deserted by Puckers

"'O, Dick!' she said, 'I couldn't help it!'"

and her assistants. His honest heart turned very sick and cold. Half-an-hour after, passing the same spot, they were there still; and then, I think, he knew that he was overtaken by the first misfortune of his life.

Later, when the ball was over, and he had wished Mrs. Stanmore good-night, he went up to Maud with a grave, kind face.

"We never had our waltz, Miss Bruce," said he; "and —and—there's *a reason*, isn't there?"

He was white to his very lips. Through all her triumph, she felt a twinge, far keener than she expected, of compunction and remorse.

"O, Dick!" she said, "I couldn't help it! Lord Bearwarden proposed to me in that room."

"And you accepted him?" said Dick, trying to steady his voice, wondering why he felt half suffocated all the time.

"And I accepted him."

CHAPTER XVI

"MISSING—A GENTLEMAN"

"AGE about thirty. Height five feet nine inches and a half—fair complexion—light-grey eyes—small reddish-brown whiskers, close-trimmed—short dark hair. Speaks fast, in a high key, and has a habit of drawing out his shirt-sleeves from beneath his cuffs. When last seen, was dressed in a dark surtout, fancy necktie, black-cloth waistcoat, Oxford-mixture trousers, and Balmoral boots. Wore a black hat with maker's name inside—Block and Co., 401 Regent Street. Whoever will give such information to the authorities as may lead to the discovery of the above, shall receive—A Reward!"

Such was the placard that afforded a few minutes' speculation for the few people who had leisure to read it, one fine morning about a week after Mrs. Stanmore's eventful ball, and towards the close of the London season; eliciting at the same time criticism not altogether favourable on the style of composition affected by our excellent police. The man was missing no doubt, and had been missing for some days before anxiety, created by his absence, growing into alarm for his safety, had produced the foregoing advertisement, prompted by certain affectionate misgivings of Mr. Bargrave, since the lost sheep was none other than his nephew Tom Ryfe. The old man felt, indeed, seriously discomposed by the prolonged absence of this the only member of his family. It was unjustifiable, as he remarked twenty times a day, unfeeling, unheard-of, unaccountable. He rang for the servants

at his private residence every quarter of an hour or so to learn if the truant had returned. He questioned the boy at the office sharply and repeatedly as to orders left with him by Mr. Ryfe before he went away, only to gather from the answers of this urchin, who would, indeed, have forgotten any number of such directions, that he looked on the present period of anxiety in the light of a holiday and festival, devoutly praying that his taskmaster might never come back again. Finally in despair poor Bargrave cast himself on the sympathy of Dorothea, who listened to his bewailings with stolid indifference when sober, and replied to them by surmises of the wildest improbability when drunk.

Alas, in common with so many others of her class, the charwoman took refuge from care in constant inebriety. Her imagination thus stimulated, pointed, like that of some old Castilian adventurer, steadily to the west.

"Lor, Mr. Bargrave," she would say, staring helplessly in his face, and yielding to the genial hiccough which refused to be kept down, "he be gone to 'Merriky, poor dear, to better hisself, I make no doubt. Don't ye take on so. It's a weary world, it is; and that's where he be gone, for sure!"

Yet she knew quite well where he was hidden all the time; and, inasmuch as she had some regard for her kind old employer, the knowledge almost drove her mad. Therefore it was that Dorothea, harassed by conflicting feelings, drowned her sorrows perseveringly in the bowl.

For a considerable period this poor woman had suffered a mental torture, the severest, perhaps, to which her sex can be subjected. She had seen the man she loved—and, though she was only a drudge, and not by any means a tidy one, she could love very dearly—she had seen, I say, the man she loved gradually learning to despise her affection, and to estrange himself from her society. She was a good deal afraid of "Gentleman Jim"—perhaps she liked him none the less for that—and dared neither tax him with falsehood nor try to worm out of him the assurance that she had or had not a rival. Nevertheless, she was determined to ascertain the cause of her lover's indifference to herself, and his changed conduct in other relations of life.

Jim had always been somewhat given to the adornment of his person, affecting that flash and gaudy style of decoration so much in favour with dog-stealers and men of like dubious professions. Of late, however, he had adopted, with different tastes and habits, a totally different costume —when "off duty," as he called it—meaning thereby release from the fulfilment of some business engagement subject to penalties affixed by our criminal code. He now draped himself in white linen, dark-coloured clothes, a tall hat, and such outward marks of respectability, if not station, going even so far as to invest in kid gloves and an "umbrellier," as he called that instrument. At first sight, but for his boots, Jim might almost have been mistaken for a real gentleman. About this period, too, he left off vulgar liquors, and shamefully abandoned a short black pipe that had stuck by him through many ups and downs, substituting for these stimulants a great deal of brown sherry and certain sad-coloured cigars, demanding strong lungs and a strong stomach as well. These changes did the forlorn Dorothea note with increasing anxiety, and, because every woman becomes keen-sighted and quick-witted where her heart is concerned, drew from them an augury fatal to her future happiness. After a while, when the suspense grew intolerable, she resolved on putting a stop to it by personal inquiry, and with that view, as a preliminary, kept herself tolerably sober for twenty-four hours, during which probationary period she instituted a grand "clean up" of his premises; and so, as she mentally expressed it, "with a cool 'ead and a clean 'ouse and a clear conscience," confronted her employer on the stairs.

Old Bargrave had of late become very nervous and uneasy. The full meals, the daily bottle of port, the life of self-indulgence, though imparting an air of portliness and comfort while everything went well, had unfitted him sadly for a contest with difficulty or reverse. Like the fat troop-horse that looks so sightly on parade, a week's campaigning reduced him to a miserable object—flabby, shrunk, dispirited, and with a sinking heart at least, if not a sore back.

Dorothea's person blocked up the staircase before him,

or he would have slipped by and locked himself unnoticed in his chambers.

"Can I speak with you, sir?" said the charwoman. "Now, sir, if you please—himmediate."

Old Bargrave trembled.

"Certainly, Dorothea, certainly. What is it, my good girl? You've heard something. They've traced him—they've found him. One minute, my good girl—one minute, if you please."

He had preceded her through the office to his own inner room, and now, shaking all over, sat down in his easy-chair, pressing both hands hard on its arms to steady himself. Dorothea, staring helplessly at the wall over his head, made a muff of her apron, and curtsied; nothing more.

"Speak!" gasped the old gentleman convulsively.

"It's my haunt, if you please, sir," said Dorothea, with another curtsey.

"D——n your aunt!" vociferated Bargrave. "It's my nephew! Have you heard nothing? I'm hasty, my good girl; I'm anxious. I—I haven't another relation in the world. Have they told you anything more?"

Dorothea began to cry.

"He be gone to 'Meriker, for sure," she whimpered, trying back on the old consolatory suggestion; "to better hisself, no doubt. It's me, sir; that's my haunt. She's wuss this turn. An' if so be as you could spare me for the day—I've been and cleaned up everythink, and I'd wipe over that there table and shake the dust out o' them curtains in five minutes, and——"

"That will do—that will do!" exclaimed the old gentleman, aghast, as well he might be, at the proposal, since none of the furniture in question had been subjected to such a process for years, and immediate suffocation, with intolerable confusion of papers, must have been the result. "If you want to go and see your aunt, my girl, go, in heaven's name. I can spare you as long as you like. But you mustn't tidy up here. No; that would never do. And, Dorothea, if you should hear anything, come and tell me that instant. Never mind the expense. I'd give

a great deal to know he was safe. Ah, I'd give all I have in the world to see him back again."

She curtsied and hurried out, leaving Bargrave to immerse himself in law-papers and correspondence. From sheer force of habit he took refuge in his daily work at this hour of anxiety and sad distress. In such sorrows it is well for a man to have disciplined his mind till it obeys him instinctively, like a managed steed bearing its rider at will out of the crowd of assailants by whom he is beset.

Dorothea, scrubbing her face with yellow soap till it shone again, proceeded to array herself in raiment of many colours, and, when got up to her own satisfaction, scuttled off to a distant part of London, making use of more than one omnibus in her journey; and so, returning almost upon her tracks, confronted Gentleman Jim as he emerged from his usual house of call in the narrow street out of Holborn.

He started, and his face lengthened with obvious disgust.

"What's up now, lass?" said he. "I've business to-night. D'ye mind? Blessed if my mouth isn't as dry as a cinder-heap. You go home, like a good gal, and I'll take ye to the theaytre, perhaps, to-morrow. I haven't a minnit to stop. I didn't ought to be here now."

The promised treat, the hurried manner, above all the affected kindness of tone, roused her suspicions to the utmost; and Dorothea was woman enough to feel for the moment that she dared match her wits against those of her betrayer.

"It's lucky," she answered coolly; "for I've got to be home afore dark, and they're lighting the lamps now. I've been down to see arter him, Jim, an' I thought I'd just step round and let you know. I footed it all the way back, that's why I'm so late now."

She paused and looked steadily in his face.

"Well?" said Jim, turning very pale, while his eyes glared in hers with a wild horrible meaning.

She answered his look rather than his exclamation.

"He's a trifle better since morning. He don't know nothing yet, nor he won't neither, not for a while to come. But he ain't a-goin' to die, Jim—not this turn."

His colour came back, and he laughed brutally. "Blast

him! d'ye think I care?" said he, with a wild flourish of his arm; but added in a quieter voice, "Perhaps it's as well, lass. Cold meat isn't very handy to hide, and he's worth more alive than dead. I couldn't hardly keep from laffin' this mornin' when I saw them bills. I'll stand ye a drop, lass, if you're dry, but I mustn't stop with ye to drink it."

Dorothea declined this liberal offer.

"Good-night, Jim," said she, and turned coldly away. She had no heart for a more affectionate farewell; and could their positions have been reversed he must have detected something strange in this unusual lack of cordiality. But men are seldom close observers in such matters, and Jim was full of his own interests, his own projects, his own wild senseless infatuation.

He watched her round her homeward turn, and then started off at a quick pace in an opposite direction. With all his cunning he would never have suspected that Dorothea, whose intellect he considered little better than an idiot's, could presume to dog his footsteps; and the contempt he entertained for her—of which she was beginning to be uncomfortably conscious—no doubt facilitated this unhappy creature's operations.

Overhead the sky was dark and lowering, the air thick as before thunder; and though the gaslights streamed on every street in London, it was an evening well suited to watch an unsuspecting person unobserved.

Dorothea, returning on her footsteps, kept Jim carefully in sight, walking from twenty to fifty yards behind him, and as much as possible on the other side of the street. There was no danger of her losing him. She could have followed that figure—to her the type of comeliness and manhood—all over the world; but she dreaded, with a fear that was almost paralysing, the possibility of his turning back and detecting that he was tracked. "He'd murder me, for sure," thought Dorothea, trembling in every limb. Nevertheless, the love that is strong as death, the jealousy that is cruel as the grave, goaded her to persevere; and so she flitted in his wake with a noiseless step, wonderfully gliding and ghostlike considering the solidity of her proportions.

Jim turned out of Oxford Street to stop at an ill-looking dirty little house, the door of which seemed to open to him of its own accord. She spied a small grocer's shop nearly opposite not yet shut up. To dodge rapidly in and sit down for a few minutes while she cheapened a couple of ounces of tea, afforded Dorothea an excellent chance of watching his further movements unseen.

He emerged again almost immediately with a false beard and a pair of spectacles, carrying a large parcel carefully wrapped in oiled silk; then, after looking warily up and down the street, turned into the main thoroughfare for the chase to begin once more.

"He must be dreadful hot, poor Jim!" thought Dorothea, pitying him in spite of herself for his false beard and heavy parcel, while she wiped away the drops already beginning to pour off her own forehead.

The night was indeed close and sultry. A light warm air, reeking like the steam from a cook-shop, breathed in her face, while a low roll of thunder, nearly lost in the noise of wheels, growled and rumbled among the distant Surrey hills.

She followed him perseveringly through the more fashionable streets and squares of London, tolerably silent and deserted now in the interval between dinner and concert, ball or drum. Here and there through open windows might be seen a few gentlemen at their wine, or a lady in evening dress coming out for a gasp of fresh air on the balcony overhead; but on the pavement below, a policeman under a lamp or a lady's-maid hurrying on an errand were the only occupants, and these took no heed of the bearded man with his parcel, nor of the dirty gaudily-dressed woman who followed like his shadow. So they turned down Grosvenor Place and through Belgrave Square into one of the adjoining streets. Here Jim, slackening pace, took his hat off and wiped his brow. Dorothea, with all her faculties on the stretch, slipped into a portico at the very moment when he glanced round on every side to make sure he was not watched. From this hiding-place she observed him, to her great astonishment, ring boldly at the door of a large handsome house. That astonishment was increased to see him

admitted without demur by an irreproachable footman, powder, plush, and all complete. Large drops of rain began to fall, and outside London, beyond the limits of our several gas companies, it lightened all round the horizon.

Dorothea crept nearer the house where Jim had disappeared. On the ground floor, in a dining-room of which the windows stood open for the heat, she saw his figure within a few yards of her. He was unpacking his bundle and arranging its contents on the table, where a servant had placed a lamp when he admitted this unusual visitor. The rain fell now in good earnest, and not a living creature remained in the street. Dorothea cowered down by the area railings and watched.

Not for long. The dining-room door opened, and into the lamplight, like a vision from some world of which poor Dorothea could scarcely form the vaguest conception, came a pale haughty woman, beautiful exceedingly, before whom Jim, her own Jim, usually so defiant, seemed to cower and tremble like a dog. Even in that moment of bewilderment Dorothea's eye, woman-like, marked the mode in which Miss Bruce's long black hair was twisted, and missed neither the cut nor texture of her garments.

Jim spread his goods out for inspection. It was obvious that he had gained admission to the house under the guise of a dealer in rare silks and Eastern brocades. We, who know everything, know that Mrs. Stanmore was dozing over her coffee up-stairs, and that this scheme, too, originated in the fertile brain and determined character of her niece.

"I'll take that shawl, if you please," said Maud, in her cool authoritative way. "I dare say it's better than it looks. Put it aside for me. And—you were to ask your own price."

Dorothea, drenched to the skin, felt nevertheless a fire burning within; for, raising her face to peer above the area railings, she marked a mute worship in Jim's adoring eyes; she marked the working of his features, pale, as it seemed, with some new and overpowering emotion. Could this be Gentleman Jim? She had seen him asleep and awake, pleased and angry, drunk and sober, but she had

never seen that face before. Through all its agony there rose in her heart a feeling of anger at such transparent folly—almost of contempt for such weakness in a man.

His voice came hoarse and thick while he answered—

"Never name it, miss, never name it. I done as you desired, an' a precious awkward job it were! *He'll tell no tales now!*"

She started. The hand in which she held a small embroidered note-case trembled visibly; but her voice, though low, was perfectly firm and clear.

"If you exceeded my order," said she, "you have nothing to hope from my forbearance. I shall be the first to have you punished. I told you so."

He could scarcely contain his admiration.

"What a plucked 'un!" he muttered; "what a plucked 'un! No, miss," he added, "you needn't fear. Fear, says I! You never feared nothink in your life. You needn't think of that 'ere. Me and another party we worked it off as neat as wax, without noise and without violence. We've a-trapped him safe, miss, and you've got nothink to do but just you lift up your hand, and we'll put him back, not a ha'porth the wuss, on the very spot as we took him from."

She drew a great breath of relief, but suffered not a muscle of her countenance to betray her feelings.

"It is better so," she observed quietly. "Remember, once for all, when I give orders they must be obeyed to the letter. I am satisfied with you, Jim—I think your name is Jim?"

There was just the least possible inflection of kindness in her voice, and this ruffian's heart leaped to meet it, while the tears came to his eyes. He dashed them savagely away, and took a letter from his breast-pocket.

"That's all we found on him, miss," said he, "that an' a couple o' cigars. He hadn't no watch, no blunt, no latch-key, no nothink. I kep' this here careful to bring it you. Bless ye, I can read, I can, *well*, but I've not read that there. I couldn't even smoke of his cigars. No, I guv 'em to a pal. This here job warn't done for money, miss! It were done for—for—well—for *you!*"

She took the letter with as little emotion as if it had

been an ordinary tradesman's bill for a few shillings; yet had she once pawned a good many hundred pounds' worth of diamonds only on the chance of recovering its contents.

"At least, I must pay you for the shawl," said she, pulling the notes out of their case.

"For the shawl, miss? Yes," answered Jim. "Ten pounds will buy that, an' leave a fair profit for my pal as owns it. Not a shilling more, miss—no—no. D'ye mind the first time as ever I see you? D'ye mind what I said then? There's one chap, miss, in this world, as belongs of you, body and soul. He's a poor chap, he is, and a rough chap, but he asks no better than to sarve of you, be the job what it may—ay, if he swings for it! Now it's out!"

Over her pale haughty face swept a flash of mingled triumph, malice, and even amusement, while she listened to this desperate man's avowal of fidelity and belief. But she only vouchsafed him a cold condescending smile, observing, as she selected a ten-pound note—

"Is there nothing I can do to mark my satisfaction and approval?"

He fidgeted, glanced at the note-case, and began packing up his goods.

"If *you're* pleased, miss, that's enough. But if so be as you *could* do without that there empty bit of silk, and spare it me for a keepsake—well, miss, I'd never part with it—no, not if the rope was rove, and the nightcap drawed over my blessed face!"

She put the empty note-case in his hand.

"You're a fool," she said, ringing the bell for a servant to show him out; "but you're a stanch one, and I wish there were more like you."

"Blast me, I *am!*" he muttered; adding, as he turned into the wet street, and walked on through the rain like a man in a dream, "if there was more such gals as you, maybe there'd be more fools like me. It would be a rum world then, blessed if it wouldn't! And now it will be a whole week afore I shall see her again!"

Dorothea, clinging to the area railings, even in the imminence of discovery had not the heart to leave them as he went out. Stupefied, bewildered, benumbed, she

could scarcely believe in the reality of the scene she had witnessed. She felt it explained much that had lately puzzled her exceedingly; but at present she was unequal to the task of arranging her ideas so as to understand the mystery that enveloped her.

Gradually the thunderstorm rolled away, the rain cleared off, the moon shone out, and Dorothea reached her squalid home, drenched, cold, weary, and sick at heart.

CHAPTER XVII

"WANTED—A LADY"

We must go back a few days to watch with Dick Stanmore through the sad sorrowing hours that succeeded his step-mother's ball. I trust I have not so described this gentleman as to leave an impression that he was what young ladies call a romantic person. Romance, like port wine, after-dinner slumbers, flannel next the skin, and such self-indulgences, should be reserved as a luxury for after-life; under no circumstances must it be permitted to impair the efficiency of manhood in its prime. Dick Stanmore took his punishment with true British pluck and pertinacity. It was a "facer." As it could not possibly be returned, his instincts prompted him to "grin and bear it." He had sustained a severe fall. His first impulse was to get up again. None the less did nerves thrill and brain spin with the force and agony of the blow. Perhaps the very nature that most resists, suffers also the most severely from such shocks, as a granite wall cracks and splinters to the round shot, while an earthwork accepts that rushing missile with a stolid harmless thud.

Dick's composition was at least not earthy enough to let him go to bed after this recent downfall of his hopes. Restless, hurt, sorrowful, angry with himself, not *her*—for his nature could be gallantly loyal under defeat—sleep was as impossible as any other occupation requiring quietude and self-control. No. The only thing to be done was to smoke, of course! and then to pack up everything he

could lay hands on, without delay, so as to leave London that very morning, for any part of England, Europe, or the habitable world. All places would be alike to him now, only the farther from Belgrave Square the better. Therefore it was, perhaps, that, after shamming to breakfast, and enduring considerable pain in a state of enforced inactivity, while his servant completed their travelling arrangements, he drove through this very Square, though it lay by no means in a direct line for the railway station to which he was bound. Those who believe in ghosts affirm that a disembodied spirit haunts the place it best loved on earth; and what are we but the ghosts of our former selves, when all that constituted the pith and colouring and vitality of our lives has passed away? Ah! Lady Macbeth's are not the only white hands from which that cruel stain can never be removed. There are soft eyes and sweet smiles and gentle whispers enough in the world guilty of moral manslaughter (I believe the culprits themselves call it "justifiable homicide"), not entirely divested of that malice prepense which constitutes the crime of murder! Happy the victims in whom life is not completely extinguished, who recover their feet, bind up their wounds, and undeterred by a ghastly experience, hazard in more encounters a fresh assassination of the heart. Such fortitude would have afforded a remedy to Dick Stanmore. "Wanted—a lady!" should have been the motto emblazoned on his banner if ever he turned back into the battle once more. Homœopathy, no doubt, is the treatment for a malady like that which prostrated this hapless sufferer,—homœopathy, at first distrusted, ridiculed, accepted only under protest, and in accordance with the force of circumstances, the exigences of the position; gradually found to soothe, to revive, to ameliorate, till at last it effects a perfect and triumphant cure, nay, even shows itself powerful enough to produce a second attack of the same nature, fierce and virulent as the first. But, meanwhile, Dick Stanmore followed the ghost's example, and drove sadly through Belgrave Square, as he told himself, for the last—last time! Had he been an hour later, just one hour, he might have taken away with him a subject for considerable speculation, during his proposed

travels in search of distraction. This is what he would have seen.

A good-looking bad-looking man, with dark eyes and hair, sweeping a crossing very inefficiently, while he watched the adjacent street with an air of eager anxiety, foreign to an occupation which indeed seems to demand unusual philosophy and composure of mind. Presently, Maud Bruce, tripping daintily across the path he had swept clean, let herself into the Square gardens, dropping her glove in the muddy street as she took a pass-key from her pocket. The crossing-sweeper pounced at it like a hawk, stuck his broom against a lamp-post, and hurried round to the other side of the Square.

Here Maud appeared at the gate, while "Gentleman Jim," for it was none other, returned her glove without a word through the iron bars.

"I hardly expected you so soon," said Miss Bruce. "My letter could only have been posted at five this morning."

"You might ha' made sure I'd come that instant, miss," answered Jim, his face brightening with excitement and delight. "I knowed who 'twas from, well enough, though 'twas but a line as a man might say. I ain't had it an hour, an' here I am, ready and willing for your job, be it what it may!"

"You're a bold fellow, I know," said Maud, "but it's a desperate undertaking. If you don't like it, say so."

Jim swore a horrible oath, and then drew his hand across his lips as though to wipe away its traces.

"Look'ee here, miss," he muttered in a hoarse thick whisper. "If you says to me, Jim, says you, go and rob that there church—see, now, I'd have the wards of the big key in wax, ah! this weary arternoon. If you says to me, says you, Jim, go and cut that there parson's throat, I've got a old knife in my pocket as I wouldn't want to sharpen afore the job was done, and the parson too, for good an' all!"

There was a peculiar grace in the setting on of Maud's head, especially in the firm lines of her mouth and chin. Though she looked even paler than usual, her rare beauty,

always somewhat resolute and defiant in character, never showed to greater advantage than now.

"I won't speak of reward to *you*," she said, very clearly and distinctly, "though you shall name your own price, and be paid at your own time. Listen—I have an enemy—a bitter enemy who threatened me—actually dared to threaten *me* last night—who would hesitate at nothing to do me an injury."

"Blast him!" muttered Jim ferociously. "Leave 'un to me, miss, leave 'un to me!"

She took no heed of his interruption.

"That enemy," she continued, "must be got out of my way."

The sweat stood on her listener's brow.

"I understand you, miss," he gasped in a broken voice. "It shall be done."

Over the face this ruffian thought too beautiful to be mortal came a stern proud smile.

"I forbid *that*," she replied, "forbid it distinctly, and I *will* be obeyed to the very letter. If you were to kill this man, I should be the first to hand you over to justice. Listen. He must be kept quiet and out of the way for something less than three weeks. After that, he can harm me no more. I bear him no grudge, I wish him no evil; but he must be taken away this very afternoon. Every hour might make it too late. Can you do this?"

Jim pondered. He was an experienced criminal. A man with certain qualities which, in the honest paths of life, might have made him successful, even remarkable. In a few seconds he had run over his chances, his resources, his risk of detection, all the pros and cons of the undertaking. He looked cheerfully in her face.

"I *can*, miss," said he confidently. "I don't go for to say as it's a job to be done right off, like easy shavin', or taking a dozen of hiseters. But it's to be worked. I'll engage for that, and I'm the chap as can work it. You couldn't give me no longer than to-day, could ye now?"

"If it's not done at once, you must let it alone," was the answer.

"Now that's business," replied Jim, growing cooler and more self-possessed as he reviewed the difficulties of his

enterprise. "The party being in town, miss, o' course. You may depend on my makin' of him safe before nine o'clock to-night. Shall I trouble you for the name and address, or will you give me a description in full, that will do as well?"

"You have seen him," she observed quietly. "On this very spot where I am standing now. I walked with him in these gardens the first morning you swept our crossing. A gentleman in a frock coat with a bunch of flowers at his buttonhole. Do you remember?"

Did he remember? Why the man's figure, features, every detail of his dress was photographed on Jim's heart.

"No need to tell me his name, miss," was the answer. "I knows him as well as I knows these here old shoes o' mine. I've had my eye on him ever since. I can tell you when he goes out, when he comes in, where he takes his meals. I could lay my hand on him in any part of this here town at two hours' notice. Make yourself easy, miss. Your job's as good as done, and some day you'll see me again, miss, won't you? And—and you'll thank me kindly, perhaps, when it's off your mind for good and all!"

"You shall come and tell me the particulars," answered Miss Bruce, with a gracious smile that seemed to flood him in sunshine, "when the thing is finished. And now I ought to be at home again; but before I go, understand plainly, to-morrow will be too late!"

Jim was deep in thought.

"The bird might be shy, miss," said he after a pause. "Some on 'em's easy scared, and this doesn't seem like a green one, not a bit of it. Supposin' as he *won't* be 'ticed, miss; there's only one way, then!"

For a moment she felt a keen stab of compunction, but, remembering the stake she ventured, nerved herself to resist the pang. This was no time for child's play, for a morbid sensitiveness, for weak indulgence of the feelings.

"Tell him you have a message from *me*, from Miss Bruce," she replied firmly. "It will lead him anywhere."

Jim looked as if he would rather set about the business in any other way; nevertheless, he was keenly alive to the efficiency of so tempting a bait, reflecting at the same

time with a kind of awe on Mr. Ryfe's temerity in affronting such a character as this.

Another hurried sentence. A light in Jim's eyes like that with which a dog receives directions from its master, a gesture such as dismisses the same dog imperiously to its kennel, and Miss Bruce walked quietly home to her music and her embroidery, while the crossing-sweeper, recovering his broom, hurried off in another direction to commence operations against the unsuspecting Tom Ryfe.

That gentleman's feelings, as he sat in his uncle's office the morning after Mrs. Stanmore's ball, were of no enviable nature. Malice, hatred, and all uncharitableness might indeed sufficiently describe the frame of mind in which he went about his daily business, unfortunately on the present occasion an affair of such mere routine as in no way to distract his attention from his sorrows and his wrongs.

"She has dared me," thought he, poring over a deed he knew by heart, and of which his eye only took in the form and outward semblance, "challenged me to do my worst, and herself declared it is to be war to the knife. O Maud, Maud, how could you, how could you! Was it not enough to have wound yourself round my heart, to have identified yourself with my hopes, my ambition, my manhood, my very existence, and then with one turn of your hand to have destroyed them, each and all, but you must add insult to injury—must scorn and trample on me as well? Some men may stand this sort of treatment—I won't. I *have* a pull over you. Ah! I'm not such a fool, after all, perhaps, as you thought. I have it, and hang me, but I'll make use of it! You have blasted my life, and thought it good fun, no doubt. I'll see if I can't give tit-for-tat and spoil *your* little game, my haughty lady, with your white face and your cursed high-handed airs. Yet, how I loved them—how I loved them! Must I never see a woman again without that queenly beauty coming between me and my share of happiness? What right had you to destroy my whole future? And I would have been so different if you had cared for me; I might have made a better gentleman than any of them. As for that empty-headed cousin (to be sure you've thrown him over, too,

and I hope he feels it to his marrow), and that swaggering lord, can they care for you like I did? Would they have worked as hard to please you, and sat up night after night, as I have done, poring over papers to see you righted? and why am I to be sacrificed to such men as these? I won't be sacrificed; no, by heavens! I've done my best for you hitherto, Miss Bruce, and you've dared me now to do my *worst*. I shall rather astonish you, I think, when you learn what that worst is. Curse you; I'll have no mercy! If I *am* to suffer, I'll take care not to suffer meekly and alone. It's *my* turn now, my lady, as, before twelve hours are out, you shall know to your cost."

Mr. Ryfe, you see, was sadly wanting in that first element of chivalry which establishes the maxim that "a woman can do no wrong." This principle, when acted up to in its fullest sense, is convenient, no doubt, and beneficial to us all. It involves free trade on the broadest basis, sweeping away much of the selfishness and morbid sentimentality that constitute the superstition we call Love. *She* has a perfect right to change her mind, bless her! why shouldn't she? And so, no doubt, have *you!* Ring for fresh cards, cut again for partners, and so sit merrily down to another rubber. Thus, too, you will learn to play the game cautiously and with counters, saving both your temper and your gold. It may be you will miss the excitement of real gambling, finding the pastime so wearisome that you are fain to leave off and go to bed. Whatever you do, retire with a good grace. It is but a choice of evils. Perhaps you had better be bored than miserable, and, if less exciting, it is surely less painful to stifle listless yawns, than to crush down the cry of a wilful wounded heart.

Mr. Ryfe, however, I consider perfectly inexcusable in the course he chose to adopt. Self-sacrifice is, of all others, the quality by which, in questions of feeling, the true gold is to be distinguished from the false. But Tom had no idea of such generous immolation—not he.

Hour after hour, poring over the deeds of which he never read a line, he raged and chafed and came to a determination at last.

He had thought of writing to Lord Bearwarden, in his

own name, warning him as a true friend of the lady's antecedents who was about to become his lordship's bride, enclosing at the same time a copy of her promise to himself; for, with professional caution, he reflected that the original had better not pass out of his hands. Then, he argued, if his lordship could only see with his own eyes the treasured lines in her well-known handwriting, by which Miss Bruce had bound herself in all honour to the lawyer's clerk, that nobleman must readily, and of necessity, hold himself absolved from any engagement he might have contracted with her, and perceive at once the folly and impropriety of making such a woman his wife. Yes, Lord Bearwarden should read the letter itself; he would obtain a personal interview that very evening, when the latter dressed for dinner. There would thus be no necessity for trusting the important document out of his own possession, while at the same time he could himself adopt a tone of candour and high feeling, calculated to make a strong impression on such a true gentleman as his friend.

He took Miss Bruce's promise from the safe in which he kept it locked up, and hid it carefully in his breast-pocket. Then, looking at his watch, and finding it was time to leave his office for the West-End, heaped his papers together, bundled them into the safe, and prepared to depart.

Walking moodily down-stairs he was waylaid by Dorothea, who, sluicing the steps with dirty water under pretence of cleaning them, thus held, as it were, the key of the position, and so had him at command. It surprised him not a little that she should desist from her occupation to request an interview.

"Can I speak to you for a moment, Mr. Thomas?" said she. "It's private, and it's particular."

The amount of pressure put on Dorothea ere she consented to the job now in hand it is not for me to estimate. Her Jim was a man of unscrupulous habits and desperate resources. It is probable that she had been subjected to the influences of affection, sentiment, and intimidation, perhaps even physical force. I cannot tell, my business is only with results.

There was no escaping, even had Mr. Ryfe been so inclined, for Dorothea's person, pail, and scrubbing-brushes defended the whole width of the staircase.

"It's strange, Mr. Thomas," she continued, pushing the hair off her face. "Lor! I was that frightened and that surprised, as you might have 'eard my 'eart beatin' like carpets. Who she may be, an' wot she may be, I know no more than the dead. But her words was these—I'm tellin' you her werry words—If you can make sure of seeing Mr. Ryfe, says she,—that's *you*, Mr. Thomas,—any time afore to-night, says she, tell him, as I must have a word with him in priwate atween him and me this werry evening, or it would have been better for both of us, poor things, says she, if we'd 'a never been born!"

Tom Ryfe stared.

"What do you mean?" he said. "Am I to understand that the—the lady who spoke to you was desirous of an interview with me here in chambers, or where?"

"An' a born lady she is an' were!" answered Dorothea, incoherent, and therefore in the acute lawyer's opinion more likely to be telling the truth. "A beautiful lady, too—tall and pale, 'aughty and 'andsome—(Tom started) —dressed in 'alf-mourning, with a black-and-white parasol in her 'and. It's to see you priwate, Mr. Thomas, as she bade me to warn of you. To-night at height in the Birdcage Walk, without fail, says she, for it's life and death as is the matter, or marriage, says she, which is sometimes wuss nor both."

Dorothea then removed herself, her pail, and her scrubbing-brushes to one side, as though inviting him to follow out his assignation without delay.

"I ask yer pardon," said she, "Mr. Thomas, if I done wrong. But the young lady she seemed so anxious and aggrawated-like. No offence, sir, I 'umbly 'ope, and she guv' me 'alf-a-sovereign."

"And I'll give you another," exclaimed Tom, placing a coin of that value in Dorothea's damp hot hand. "The Birdcage Walk, at eight. And it's past six now. Thank you, Dorothea. I've no doubt it's all right. I'll start at once."

Leaving Gray's Inn, the warm tears filled his eyes to

think he had so misjudged her. Evidently she was in some difficulty, some complication; she had no opportunity of confiding to him, and hence her apparent heartlessness, the inconsistency of her conduct which he had been unable to understand. Obviously she loved him still, and the conviction filled him with rapture, all the more thrilling and intense for his late misgivings.

He pulled her written promise from his pocket, and kissed it passionately, reading it over and over again in the fading light. A prayer rose from heart to lip for the woman he loved, while he looked up to the crimson glories of the western sky. Do such prayers fall back in the form of curses on the heads of those who betray, haunting them in their sorrows—at their need—worst of all in their supreme moments of happiness and joy? God forbid! Rather let us believe that, true to their heaven-born nature, they are blessings for those who give and those who receive.

Some two hours later, Tom Ryfe found himself pacing to and fro under the trees in the Birdcage Walk, with a happier heart, though it beat so fast, than had been within his waistcoat for weeks.

It was getting very dark, and even beneath the gas-lamps it was difficult to distinguish the figure of man or woman, flitting through the deep shadows cast by trees still thick with their summer foliage. Tom, peering anxiously into the obscure, could make out nothing but a policeman, a foot-guardsman with a clothes-basket, and a drunken slattern carrying her baby upside-down.

He was growing anxious. Big Ben's booming tones had already warned him it was a quarter past eight, when, suddenly, so close to him he could almost touch it, loomed the figure of a woman.

"Miss Bruce," he exclaimed—"Maud—is it you?"

Turning his own body, so as to take advantage of a dim ray from the nearest gaslight, he was aware that the woman, shorter and stouter than Miss Bruce, had muffled herself in a cloak, and was closely veiled.

"You have a letter—a message," he continued in a whisper. "It's all right. I'm the party you expected to meet—here—at eight—under the trees."

"And wot the —— are you at with my missus under the trees?" growled a brutal voice over his shoulder, while Tom felt he was helplessly pinioned by a pair of strong arms from behind, that crushed and bruised him like iron. Ere he could twist his hands free to show fight, which he meant to do pretty fiercely, he found himself baffled, blinded, suffocated, by a handkerchief thrust into his face, while a strong, pungent, yet not altogether unpleasant flavour of ether filled eyes, mouth, and nostrils, till it permeated to his very lungs. Then with every pulsation of the blood Big Ben seemed to be striking inside his brain till something gave way with a great whizz! like the mainspring of a watch, and Tom Ryfe was perfectly quiet and comfortable henceforth.

Five minutes afterwards a belated bricklayer lounging home with his mate observed two persons, man and woman, supporting between them a limp helpless figure, obviously incapable of sense or motion. Said the bricklayer, "That's a stiff-'un, Bill, to all appearance."

"Stiff-'un be d——d!" retorted Bill; "he's only jolly drunk. I wish I was too!"

The bricklayer seemed a man of reflection; for half-a-mile or so he held his peace, then, with a backward nod of the head, to indicate his meaning, observed solemnly—

"I wouldn't take that chap's head-ache when he comes to, no, not to be as jolly drunk as he is this minnit—I wouldn't!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"THE COMING QUEEN"

"And whenever she comes she will find me waiting
To do her homage—my queen—my queen!"

How many an aspiring heart has breathed the high chivalrous sentiment, never before so touchingly expressed, as in the words of this beautiful song! How many a gallant generous nature has desired with unspeakable longing to lay its wealth of loyalty and devotion at her feet who is to prove the coming queen of its affections, the ladye of its love! And for how many is the unwavering worship, the unfailing faith, the venture of wealth and honour, the risk of life and limb, right royally rewarded according to its merits and its claim! I am not sure that implicit belief, unquestioning obedience, are the qualities most esteemed by those illustrious personages on whom they are lavished; and I think that the rebel who sends in his adhesion on his own terms is sometimes treated with more courtesy and consideration than the stanch vassal whose fidelity remains unaffected by coldness, ingratitude, or neglect.

Dick Stanmore, reading in the *Morning Post* an eloquent account of Viscount Bearwarden's marriage to Miss Bruce, with the festivities consequent thereon, felt that he had sadly wasted his loyalty, if indeed this lady were the real sovereign to whom the homage of his heart was due. He began now to entertain certain misgivings on that score. What if he had over-estimated his own admiration and the force of her attractions? Perhaps his *real* queen had not come to him after all. It might be she was

advancing even now in her maiden majesty, as yet unseen, but shedding before her a soft and mellow radiance, a tender quiver of light and warmth, like that which flushes the horizon at the break of a summer's day.

His dark hour had been cold and dismal enough. There is nothing to be ashamed of in the confession. Dick suffered severely, as every manly nature must suffer when deceived by a woman. He did not blame the woman—why should he ?—but he felt that a calamity had befallen him, the heaviest of his young experience, and he bore it as best he might.

"*Cœlum non animum*" is a very old proverb: his first impulse, no doubt, was to change the scene, and seek under other skies an altered frame of mind, in defiance of Horace and his worldly wisdom, so rarely at fault. In these days a code of behaviour has been established by society to meet every eventuality of life. When your fortunes are impaired you winter at Rome; when your liver is affected you travel in Germany; when your heart is broke you start at once for India. There is something unspeakably soothing, I imagine, in the swing of an elephant as he crashes through jungle, beating it out for tigers; something consolatory to wounded feelings in the grin of a heavy old tusker, lumbering along, half sulky, half defiant, winking a little blood-red eye at the pig-sticker, pushing his Arab to speed with a loose rein ere he delivers the meditated thrust that shall win first spear. Snipe, too, killed by the despairing lover while standing in a paddy-field up to his knees in water, with a tropical sun beating on his head, to be eaten afterwards in military society, not undiluted by pale ale and brandy-pawnee, afford a relief to the finer feelings of his nature as delightful as it is unaccountable; while those more adventurous spirits who, penetrating far into the mountainous regions of the north-west frontier, persecute the wild sheep or the eland, and even make acquaintance with the lordly ibex "rocketing" down from crag to crag, breaking the force and impetus of his leap by alighting on horns and forehead, would seem to gain in their life of hardship and adventure an immunity from the "common evil" which lasts them well into middle age.

Dick Stanmore's first impulse, therefore, was to secure a berth in the P. and O. steamer at once. Then he reflected that it would not be a bad plan to stop at Constantinople—one of the Egean islands, Messina—or, indeed, why go farther than Marseilles? If you come to that, Paris was the very place for a short visit. A man might spend a fortnight there pleasantly enough, even in the hot weather, and it would be a complete change, the eventual result of these deliberations being a resolve to go down and look after his landed property in the west of England. I believe that in this determination Mr. Stanmore showed more wisdom than his friends had hitherto given him credit for possessing. At his own place he had his own affairs to interest him, a good deal of business to attend to, above all, constant opportunities of doing good. This it is, I fancy, which constitutes the real pith and enjoyment of a country gentleman's life—which imparts zest and flavour to the marking of trees, the setting of trimmers, the shooting of partridges, nay, even to the joyous excitement of fox-hunting itself.

This, too, is a wondrous salve for such wounds as those under which Dick Stanmore was now smarting. The very comparison of our own sorrows with those of others has a tendency to decrease their proportions and diminish their importance. How can I prate of my cut finger in presence of your broken leg? and how utterly ridiculous would have seemed Mr. Stanmore's sentimental sorrows to one of his own labourers keeping a wife and half-a-dozen children on eleven shillings a week?

In the whole moral physic-shop there is no anodyne like duty, sweetened with a little charity towards your neighbours. Amusement and dissipation simply aggravate the evil. Personal danger, while its excitement braces nerve and intellect for the time, is an over-powerful stimulant for the imagination, and leaves a reaction sadly softening to the heart. Successful ambition, gratified vanity, what are these with none to share the triumph? But put the sufferer through a steady course of daily duties, engrossing in their nature, stupefying in the monotony of their routine, and insensibly, while his attention is distracted from self and selfish feelings, he gathers strength,

day by day, till at last he is able to look his sorrow in the face, and fight it fairly, as he would any other honourable foe. The worst is over then, and victory a mere question of time.

So Dick Stanmore, setting to work with a will, found sleep and appetite and bodily strength come back rapidly enough. He had moments of pain, no doubt, particularly when he woke in the morning. Also at intervals during the day, when the breeze sighed through his woods, or the sweetbrier's fragrance stole on his senses more heavily than usual. Once, when a gipsy-girl blessed his handsome face, adding, in the fervour of her gratitude, a thousand good wishes for "the lass he loved, as must love him dear, sure-lie!" but for very shame he could have cried like a child.

Such relapses, however, were of rarer occurrence every week. It was not long before he told himself that he had been through the worst of his ordeal and could meet Lady Bearwarden now without looking like a fool. In this more rational frame of mind Mr. Stanmore arrived in London on business at that period of settled weather and comparative stagnation called by tradesmen the "dead time of year," and found his late-acquired philosophy put somewhat unexpectedly to the proof.

He was staring at a shop-window in Oxford Street—studying, indeed, the print of a patent mowing-machine, but thinking, I fear, more of past scenes in certain well-lit rooms, on slippery floors, than of the velvet lawns at home—when a barouche drew up to the kerb-stone with such trampling of hoofs, such pulling about of horses' mouths, such a jerk and vibration of the whole concern, as denoted a smart carriage with considerable pretension, a body-coachman of no ordinary calibre. Dick turned sharply round, and there, not five yards off, was the pale face, proud, dreamy, and beautiful as of old. Had she seen him? He hardly knew, for he was sick at heart, growing white to his very lips—he, a strong healthy man, with as much courage as his neighbours. Horribly ashamed of himself he felt. And well he might be! But with more wisdom than he had hitherto shown, he made a snatch at his hat, and took refuge in immediate retreat.

It was his only chance. How, indeed, could he have met her manfully and with dignity, while every nerve and fibre quivered at her presence? how endure the shame of betraying in his manner that he loved her very dearly still? It gave him, indeed, a sharp and cruel pang to think that it had come to this—that the face he had so worshipped he must now fly from like a culprit—that for his own sake, in sheer self-defence, he must avoid her presence, as if he had committed against her some deadly injury—against *her*, for whom, even now, he would willingly have laid down his life! Poor Dick! He little knew, but it was the last pang he was destined to feel from his untoward attachment, and it punished him far more severely than he deserved.

Blundering hastily up a by-street, he ran into the very arms of a gentleman who had turned aside to apply a latch-key at the door of a rambling unfurnished-looking house, sadly in want of paint, whitewash, and general repair. The gentleman, with an exclamation of delight, put both hands on Mr. Stanmore's shoulders.

"This *is* a piece of luck!" exclaimed the latter. "Why, it's 'old Sir Simon the King'!"

His mind reverted insensibly to the pleasant Oxford days, and he used a nickname universally bestowed on his friend by the men of his college.

"And what can *you* be doing here at this time of year?" asked Simon. "In the first place, how came you to be in London? In the second, how did you ever get so far along Oxford Street? In the third, being here, won't you come up to the painting-room? I'll show you my sketches; I'll give you some 'baccy—I haven't forgot Iffley Lock and your vile habit of stopping to drink. I can even supply you with beer! We'll have a smoke, and a talk over old times."

"Willingly," answered Dick, declining the beer, however, on the plea that such potations only went well with boating or cricket, and followed the painter up-stairs into an exceedingly uncomfortable room, of which the principal object of furniture seemed to be an easel, bearing a sketch, apparently to be transferred hereafter into some unfinished picture.

Dick was in no frame of mind to converse upon his own affairs; accepting the proffered cigar, and taking the only seat in the place, he preferred listening to his friend, who got to work at once, and talked disjointedly while he painted.

"I can't complain," said Simon, in answer to the other's questions concerning his prosperity and success. "I was always a plodding sort of fellow, as you remember. Not a genius—I don't *think* I've the divine gift. Sometimes I hope it may come. I've worked hard, I grant you—very hard; but I've had extraordinary luck—marvellous! What do you think of that imp's tail?—Isn't it a trifle too long?"

"I'm no judge of imps," answered Dick. "He's horribly ugly. Go on about yourself."

"Well, as I was saying," continued Simon, foreshortening his imp the while, "my luck has been wonderful. It all began with *you*. If you hadn't gone fishing there, I should never have seen Norway. If I hadn't seen it, I couldn't have painted it."

"I'm not sure that follows," interrupted Dick.

"Well, I *shouldn't* have painted it, then," resumed the artist. "And the credit I got for those Norway sketches was perfectly absurd. I see their faults now. They're cold and crude, and one or two are quite contrary to the first principles of art. I should like to paint them all over again. But still, if I hadn't been to Norway, I shouldn't be here now."

"No more should I," observed Dick, puffing out a volume of smoke. "I should have been 'marry-ed to a mermy-ed' by this time, if you had shown a proper devotion to your art, and the customary indifference to your friend."

"O, that was nothing!" said the painter, blushing. "Any other fellow could have pulled you out just as well. I say, Stanmore, how jolly it was over there! Those were happy days. And yet I don't wish to have them back again—do you?"

Dick sighed and held his peace. For him it seemed that the light heart and joyous carelessness of that bright youthful time was gone, never to come again.

"I have learned so much since then," continued Simon,

putting a little grey into his imp's muzzle, "and unlearned so much, too, which is better still. Mannerism, Stanmore —mannerism is the great enemy of art. Now, I'll explain what I mean in two words. In the first place, you observe the light from that chink streaming down on my imp's back; well, in the picture, you know——"

"Where *is* the picture?" exclaimed Dick, whose cigar was finished, and who had no scruples in thus unceremoniously interrupting a professional lecture which previous experience told him might be wearisome. "Let's see it. Let's see *all* the pictures. Illustration's better than argument, and I can't understand anything unless it's set before me in bright colours, under my very nose."

Good-natured Simon desisted from his occupation at once, and began lifting picture after picture, as they stood in layers against the wall, to place them in a favourable light for the inspection of his friend. Many and discursive were his criticisms on these, the progressive results of eye, and hand, and brain, improving every day. Here the drawing was faulty, there the tints were coarse. This betrayed mannerism, that lacked power, and in a very ambitious landscape, enriched with wood, water, and mountain, a patchy sky spoiled the effect of the whole.

Nevertheless it seemed that he was himself not entirely dissatisfied with his work, and whenever his friend ventured on the diffident criticism of an amateur, Simon demonstrated at great length that each fault, as he pointed it out, was in truth a singular merit and beauty in the picture.

Presently, with a face of increased importance, he moved a large oblong canvas from its hiding-place, to prop it artistically at such an angle as showed the lights and shades of its finished portion to the best advantage. Then he fell back a couple of paces, contemplating it in silence with his head on one side, and so waited for his friend's opinion.

But Dick was mute. Something in this picture woke up the pain of a recent wound festering in his heart, and yet through all the smart and tingling came a strange sensation of relief, like that with which a styptic salves a sore.

"What do you think of it?" asked the artist. "I want

your candid opinion, Stanmore—impartial—unprejudiced, I tell you. I hope great things from it. I believe it far and away the best I've painted yet. Look into the work. O, it will stand inspection. You might examine it with a microscope. Then, the conception, eh? And the drawing's not amiss. A little more this way—you catch the outline of his eyebrow, with the turn of the Rhymer's head."

"Hang the Rhymer's head!" replied Dick, "I don't care about it. I won't look at it. I *can't* look at it, man, with such a woman as *that* in the picture. Old boy, you've won immortality at last!"

But Simon's face fell.

"That's a great fault," he answered gravely. "The details, though kept down as accessories to the whole, should yet be worked out so carefully as to possess individual merit of their own. I see, though; I see how to remedy the defect you have suggested. I can easily bring him out by darkening the shadows of the background. Then, this fairy at his elbow is paltry, and too near him besides. I shall paint her out altogether. She takes the eye off my principal figures, and breaks that grand line of light pouring in from the morning sky. Don't you think so?"

But Dick gave no answer. With feverish thirst and longing, he was drinking in the beauty of the Fairy Queen; and had not Simon Perkins been the dullest of observers, and the least conceited of painters, he must have felt intensely flattered by the effect of his work.

"So you like her," said he, after a pause, during which, in truth, he had been considering whether he should not paint out the intrusive fairy that very afternoon.

"Like her!" replied the other. "It's the image of the most beautiful face I ever saw in my life; only it's softer and even more beautiful. I'll tell you what, old fellow, put a price on that picture and I'll have it, cost what it may! Only you must give me a little time," added Dick somewhat ruefully, reflecting that he had spent a good deal of money lately, and rent-day was still a long way off.

Simon smiled.

"I wonder what you'd think of the original," said he,

"the model who sits to me for my Fairy Queen! I can tell you that face on the canvas is no more to be compared to hers than I am to Velasquez. And yet Velasquez must have been a beginner once."

"I don't believe there's such a woman—two such women—in London," replied his friend, correcting himself. "I can hardly imagine such eyes, such an expression. It's what the fellows who write poetry call 'the beauty of a dream,' and I'll never say poetry is nonsense again. No, that's neither more nor less than an imaginary angel, Simon. Simply an impossible duck!"

"Would you like to see her?" asked the painter, laughing. "She'll be here in five minutes. I do believe that's her step on the stairs now."

A strange wild hope thrilled through Dick Stanmore's heart. Could it be possible that Lady Bearwarden had employed his friend to paint her likeness in this fancy picture, perhaps under a feigned name, and was she coming to take her sitting now?

All his stoicism, all his philosophy, vanished on the instant. He would remain where he was though he should die for it. O, to see her, to be in the same room with her, to look in her eyes, and hear her voice once more!

A gown rustled, a light step was heard, the door opened, and a sweet laughing voice rung out its greeting to the painter from the threshold.

"So late, Simon! Shameful, isn't it? But I've got all they wanted. Such bargains! I suppose nobody ever did so much shopping in so short a——"

She caught sight of Dick, stopped, blushed, and made a very fascinating little curtsey, as they were formally introduced; but next time she spoke the merriment had gone out of her voice. It had become more staid, more formal, and its deeper, fuller tones reminded him painfully of Maud.

Yes. Had he not known Lady Bearwarden so well, he thought it would have been quite possible for him to have mistaken this beautiful young lady for that faithless peeress. The likeness was extraordinary, ridiculous. Not that he felt the least inclined to laugh. The features were absolutely the same, and a certain backward gesture of the

"She caught sight of Dick."

M or N.] [*Page* 184

head, a certain trick of the mouth and chin were identical with the manner of Lady Bearwarden, in those merry days that seemed so long ago now, when she had been Maud Bruce. Only Miss Algernon's face had a softness, a kindly trustful expression he never remembered on the other, and her large pleading eyes seemed as if they could neither kindle with anger nor harden to freezing glances of scorn.

As for the Fairy Queen, he looked from the picture to its original, and felt constrained to admit that, wondrously beautiful as he had thought its likeness on canvas, the face before him was infinitely superior to the painter's fairest and most cherished work.

Dick went away of course almost immediately, though sorely against his will. Contrary to her wont, Miss Algernon, who was rather a mimic and full of fun, neither imitated the gestures nor ridiculed the bearing of this chance visitor. "She had not observed him much," she said, when taxed by Simon with this unusual forbearance. This was false. But "she might know him again, perhaps, if they met." This, I imagine, was true.

And Dick, wending his way back to his hotel buried in thought, passed without recognising it the spot where he met Lady Bearwarden one short hour ago. He was pondering, no doubt, on the face he had just seen—on its truth, its purity, its fresh innocent mirth, its dazzling beauty, more, perhaps, than on its extraordinary likeness to hers who had brought him the one great misfortune of his life.

CHAPTER XIX

AN INCUBUS

It is not to be supposed that any gentleman can see a lady in the streets of London and remain himself unseen. In the human as in meaner races the female organ of perception is quicker, keener, and more accurate than the male. Therefore it is that a man bowing in Pall Mall or Piccadilly to some divinity in an open carriage, and failing to receive any return for his salute, sinks at once into a false position of awkwardness and discomfiture. *Il a manqué son coup*, and his face assumes incontinently the expression of one who has missed a woodcock in the open, and has no second barrel with which to redeem his shot. As Dick saw Lady Bearwarden in Oxford Street, we may be sure that Lady Bearwarden also saw Dick. Nor was her ladyship best pleased with the activity he displayed in avoiding her carriage and escaping from her society. If Mr. Stanmore had been the most successful Lovelace who ever devoted himself to the least remunerative of pursuits, instead of a loyal, kindhearted, unassuming gentleman, he could hardly have chosen a line of conduct so calculated to keep alive some spark of interest in Maud's breast as that which he unconsciously adopted. It is one thing to dismiss a lover because suited with a superior article (as some ladies send away five-foot-ten of footman when six-foot comes to look after the place), and another to lose a vassal for good, like an unreclaimed hawk, heedless of the lure, clear of the jesses, and checking, perhaps, at every kind of prey in wilful wanton flight, down-wind towards the sea.

There is but one chance for a man worsted in these duels *à l'outrance*, which are fought out with such merciless animosity. It is to bind up his wounds as best he may, and take himself off to die or get well in secret. Presently the conqueror finds that a battle only has been won, and not a territory gained. After the flush of combat comes a reaction. The triumph seems somewhat tame, ungraced by presence of the captive. Curiosity wakes up, pity puts in its pleading word, a certain jealous instinct of appropriation is aroused. Where is he? What has become of him? I wonder if he ever thinks of me *now!* Poor fellow! I shouldn't wish to be forgotten altogether, as if we had never met; and though I didn't want him to like *me*, I never meant that he was to care for anybody else. Such are the thoughts that chase each other through the female heart when deprived of sovereignty in the remotest particular; and it was very much in this way that Lady Bearwarden, sitting alone in her boudoir, speculated on the present doings and sentiments of the man who had loved her so well and had given her up so unwillingly, yet with never a word of reproach, never a look nor action that could add to her remorse or make her task more painful.

Alas, she was not happy; even now, when she had gained all she most wished and schemed for in the world. She felt she was not happy, and she felt, too, that for Dick to know of her unhappiness would be the bitterest drop in the bitter cup he had been compelled to drain.

As she looked round her beautiful boudoir, with its blue-satin hangings, its numerous mirrors, its redundancy of coronets surmounting her own cipher, twisted and twined into a far more graceful decoration than the grim heraldic bruin which formed her husband's cognisance, she said to herself that something was yet required to constitute a woman's happiness beyond the utmost efforts of the upholder's art—that even carriages, horses, tall footmen, quantities of flowers, unlimited credit, and whole packs of cards left on the hall table every day were mere accessories and superfluities, not the real pith and substance of that for which she pined.

Lady Bearwarden, more than most women, had, since

her marriage, found the worldly ball at her foot. She needed but to kick it where she would. As Miss Bruce, with nothing to depend on but her own good looks and conquering manners, she had wrested a large share of admiration from an unwilling public; now, as a peeress, and a rich one, the same public of both sexes courted, toadied, and flattered her, till she grew tired of hearing herself praised. The men—at least those of high position and great prospects—had no scruple in offering a married woman that homage which might have entailed their own domestic subjugation if laid at a spinster's feet; and the women—all except the very smartest ladies (who liked her for her utter fearlessness and *sang-froid* as well as for her own sake)—thought it a fine thing to be on intimate terms with "Maud Bearwarden," as they loved to call her, and being much afraid of her, made up to her with the sweet facility and sincerity of their sex.

Yet in defiance of ciphers, coronets, visiting-cards, blue hangings, the homage of lords, and the vassalage of ladies, there was something amiss. She caught herself continually looking back to the old days at Ecclesfield Manor, to the soft lawns and shady avenues, the fond father, who thought his darling the perfection of humanity, and whose face lit up so joyfully whenever she came into the room; the sweet delicate mother from whom she could never remember an unkind look nor an angry word; the hills, the river, the cottages, the tenants, the flower-garden, the ponies, and the old retriever that died licking her hand. She felt kindly towards Mrs. Stanmore, and wondered whether she had behaved quite as well to that lady as she ought, recalling many a little act of triumphant malice and overt resistance which afforded keen gratification to the rebel at the time. By an easy transition, she glided on to Dick Stanmore's honest and respectful admiration, his courtesy, his kindness, his unfailing forbearance and good-humour. Bearwarden was not always good-humoured—she had found that out already. But as for Dick, she remembered how no mishap nor annoyance of his own ever irritated him in the slightest degree; how his first consideration always seemed to be *her* comfort and *her* happiness; how even in his deep sorrow, deceived, humiliated,

cut to the heart, he had never so much as spoken one bitter word. How nobly had he trusted her about those diamonds! How well he had behaved to her throughout, and how fondly would he have loved and cherished her had she confided her future to his care! He must be strangely altered now, to avoid her like this. She was sure he recognised her, for she saw his face fall, saw him wince—that at least was a comfort—but never to shake hands, never even to stop and speak! Well, she had treated him cruelly, and perhaps he was right.

But this was not the actual grievance, after all. She felt she would do precisely the same over again. It was less repentance that pained her, than retribution. Maud, for the first time in her life, was beginning to feel really in love, and with her own husband. Such an infatuation, rare as it is admirable, ought to have been satisfactory and prosperous enough. When ladies do so far condescend, it is usually a gratifying domestic arrangement for themselves and their lords; but in the present instance the wife's increasing affection afforded neither happiness to herself nor comfort to her husband. There was a "Something" always between them, a shadow, not of suspicion nor mistrust, for Bearwarden was frank and loyal by nature, but of coldness. She had a secret from him, and she was a bad dissembler; his finer instincts told him that he did not possess her full confidence, and he was too proud to ask it. So they lived together a few short weeks after marriage, on outward terms of courtesy and cordiality, but with this little rift of dissatisfaction gradually yet surely widening into a fissure that should rend each of these proud unbending hearts in twain.

"What would I give to be like other wives," thought Maud, looking at a half-length of her husband in uniform, which occupied the place of honour in her boudoir. "What is it? Why is it? I would love him so, if he would let me. How I wish I could be good—*really* good, like mamma was. I suppose it's impossible now. I wonder if it's too late to try." And with the laudable intention of beginning amendment at once, Lady Bearwarden rang sharply to tell her servants she was "not at home to anybody till Lord Bearwarden came in, except"—and here she

turned away from her own footman, that he might not see the colour rising in her face—"except a man should call with some silks and brocades, in which case he was to be shown up-stairs at once."

The door had scarcely closed ere the paper-cutter in Maud's fingers broke short off at the handle. Her grasp tightened on it insensibly, while she ground and gnashed her small white teeth, to think that she, with her proud nature, in her high position, should not be free to admit or deny what visitors she pleased. So dandies of various patterns, afoot, in tea-carts, and on hacks more or less deserving in shape and action, discharged themselves of their visiting-cards at Lady Bearwarden's door, and passed on in peace to fulfil the same rite elsewhere.

Two only betrayed an unseemly emotion when informed "her ladyship was not at home": the one, a cheerful youth, bound for a water-party at Skindle's, and fearful of missing his train, thanked Providence audibly for what he called "an unexpected let off"; the other, an older, graver, and far handsomer man, suffered an expression of palpable discomfiture to overspread his comely face, and, regardless of observation, walked away from the door with the heavy step that denotes a heavy heart. Not that he had fallen in love with Lady Bearwarden—far from it. But there *was* a Somebody—that Somebody an adverse fate had decreed he must neither meet to-day nor to-morrow, and the interval seemed to both of them wearisome, and even painful. But Maud was Somebody's dear friend. Maud either had seen her or would see her that very afternoon. Maud would let him talk about her, praise her, perhaps would even give her a message—nay, it was just possible she might arrive to pay a morning visit while he was there. No wonder he looked so sad to forego this series of chances; and all the while, if he had only known it, Fate, having veered round at luncheon-time, would have permitted him to call at Somebody's house, to find her at home, enchanted to see him, and to sit with her as long as he liked in the well-known room, with its flowers and sun-shades and globes of gold-fish, and the picture over the chimney-piece, and its dear original by his side. But it is a game at cross-purposes all through this dangerous pastime; and

perhaps its very *contretemps* are what make it so interesting to the players, so amusing to the lookers-on.

Lady Bearwarden grew fidgety after a while. It is needless to say that "the man with some silks and brocades" to be admitted by her servants was none other than "Gentleman Jim," who, finding the disguise of a "travelling merchant" that in which he excited least suspicion in his interviews with her ladyship, had resolved to risk detection yet once more, and had given her notice of his intention.

We all remember Sinbad's Old Man of the Sea, and the grip of that merciless rider tightening closer and closer the longer he was carried by his disgusted victim. There is more truth in the fable than most of us would like to allow. If you once permit yourself to set up an "Old Man of the Sea," farewell to free agency, happiness, even tolerable comfort, from that time forth! Sometimes your burden takes the shape of a renewed bill, sometimes of a fatal secret, sometimes of an unwise attachment, sometimes only of a bad habit; but whatever it be, the farther you carry it the heavier it seems to grow; and in this case custom does not in the least degree reconcile you to the infliction. Up with your heels, and kick it off at any price! Even should you rick your back in the process, it is better to be crippled for life than eternally oppressed by a ruthless rider and an intolerable weight.

Gentleman Jim was becoming Lady Bearwarden's Old Man of the Sea. More than once of late he had forced himself on her presence when it was exceedingly inconvenient and even dangerous to meet him. The promised interview of to-day had been extorted from her most unwillingly, and by threats, implied if not expressed. She began to feel that she was no longer her own mistress—that she had lost her independence, and was virtually at the command of an inferior. To a proud nature like hers such a situation seemed simply intolerable.

Lord Bearwarden seldom came in much before it was time to dress for dinner; but young men's habits are not usually very regular, the monotonous custom of doing everything by clockwork being a tedious concomitant of old age. Maud could not calculate on his absence at any

particular hour of the day unless he were on duty, and the bare notion that she should *wish* thus to calculate fretted and chafed her beyond measure. It was a relief to hear the door-bell once more, and prepare to confront the worst. A London servant never betrays astonishment, nor indeed any emotion whatever, beyond a shade of dignified and forbearing contempt. The first footman showed Lady Bearwarden's suspicious-looking visitor into her boudoir with sublime indifference, returning thereafter leisurely and loftily to his tea. Maud felt her courage departing, and her defeat, like that of brave troops seized by panic, seemed all the more imminent for habitual steadiness and valour. She took refuge in an attempt to bully.

"Why are you here?" said Maud, standing bolt upright; while Gentleman Jim, with an awkward bow, began as usual to unroll his goods. "I have told you often enough this persecution must finish. I am determined not to endure it any longer. The next time you call I shall order my servants to drive you from the door. O, will you—*will* you not come to terms?"

His face had been growing darker and darker while she spoke, and she watched its expression as the Mediterranean fisherman watches a white squall gliding with fatal swiftness over the waters, to bring ruin and shipwreck and despair. It sometimes happens that the fisherman loses his head precisely at the wrong moment, so that foiled, helpless, and taken aback, he comes to fatal and irremediable grief. Thus Lady Bearwarden, too, found the nerve on which she prided herself failing when she most wanted it, and knew that the prestige and influence which formed her only safeguards were slipping from her grasp.

She had cowed this ruffian at their first meeting by an assumption of calm courage and superiority in a crisis when most women, thus confronted at dead of night by a housebreaker, would have shrunk trembling and helpless before him. She had retained her superiority during their subsequent association by an utter indifference as to results, so long as they only affected character and fortune, which to his lower nature seemed simply incomprehensible; but now that her heart was touched she could no longer remain thus reckless, thus defiant. With womanly feelings came

womanly misgivings and fear of consequences. The charm was lost, the spell broken, and the familiar spirit had grown to an exacting master from an obedient slave.

"That's not the way as them speaks who's had the pith and marrow out of a chap's werry bones," growled Jim. "There wasn't no talkin' of figure-footmen and drivin' of respectable tradesmen from folks' doors when a *man* was wanted, like this here. A *man*, I says, wot wasn't afeard to swing, if so be as he could act honourable and fulfil his bargain."

"I'll pay anything. Hush! *pray*. Don't speak so loud. What *must* my servants think? Consider the frightful risks I run. Why should you wish to make me utterly miserable—to drive me out of my senses? I'll pay anything—anything to be free from this intolerable persecution."

"Pay—pay anythink!" repeated Jim, slightly mollified by her distress, but still in a tone of deep disgust. "Pay. Ah! that's always the word with the likes of you. You think your blessed money can buy us poor chaps up, body and heart and soul. Blast your money! says I. There, that's not over civil, my lady, but it's plain speaking."

"What would you have me do?" she asked, in a low plaintive voice.

She had sunk into an arm-chair, and was wringing her hands. How lovely she looked now in her sore distress! It imparted the one feminine charm generally wanting in her beauty.

Gentleman Jim, standing over against her, could not but feel the old mysterious influence pervading him once more. "If you was to say to me, Jim, says you, I believe as you're a true chap!—I believe as you'd serve of me, body and bones. Well, not for money. Money be d——d! But for goodwill, we'll say. I believe as you thinks there's nobody on this 'arth as is to be compared of me, says you; and see now, you shall come here once a week, once a fortnit, once a month, even, and I'll never say no more about drivin' of you away; but you shall see me, and I'll speak of you kind and haffable; and whatever I wants done I'll tell you, do it: and it *will* be done; see if it won't! Why—why I'd be proud, my lady—there—and

happy too. Ay, there wouldn't walk a happier man, nor a prouder, maybe, in the streets of London!"

It was a long speech for Jim. At its conclusion he drew his sleeve across his face and bent down to re-arrange the contents of his bundle.

Tears were falling from her eyes at last. Noiselessly enough, and without that redness of nose, those contortions of face, which render them so unbecoming to most women.

"Is there no way but this?" she murmured. "No way but this? It's impossible! It's absurd! It's infamous! Do you know who I am? Do you know what you ask? How dare you dictate terms to *me?* How dare you presume to say I shall do this, I shall not do *that?* Leave my house this minute. I will not listen to another syllable!"

She was blazing out again, and the fire of pride had dried her tears ere she concluded. Anger brought back her natural courage, but it was too late.

Gentleman Jim's face, distorted with fury, looked hideous. Under his waistcoat lurked a long thin knife. Maud never knew how near, for one ghastly moment, that knife was to being buried in her round white throat.

He was not quite madman enough, however, to indulge his passions so far, with the certainty of immediate destruction.

"Have a care!" he hissed through his clenched teeth. "If you and me is to be enemies, look out! You know me—leastways you ought to; and *you* know I stick at nothing!"

She was still dreadfully frightened. Once more she went back to the old plea, and offered him fifty pounds—a hundred pounds. Anything!

He was tying the knots of his bundle. Completing the last, he looked up, and the glare in his eyes haunted her through many a sleepless night.

"You've done it now!" was all he muttered. "When next you see me you'll wish you hadn't."

It speaks well for Jim's self-command that, as he went down, he could say, "Your servant, my lord," with perfect composure, to a gentleman whom he met on the stairs.

CHAPTER XX

"THE LITTLE CLOUD"

Lord Bearwarden, like other noblemen and gentlemen keeping house in London, was not invariably fortunate in the selection of his servants. The division of labour, that admirable system by which such great results are attained, had been brought to perfection in his as in many other establishments. A man who cleaned knives, it appeared, could not possibly do anything else, and for several days the domestic arrangements below-stairs had been disturbed by a knotty question as to *whose* business it was to answer "my lord's bell." Now my lord was what his servants called rather "a arbitrary gentleman," seeming, indeed, to entertain the preposterous notion that these were paid their wages in consideration of doing as they were bid. It was not therefore surprising that figure-footmen, high of stature and faultless in general appearance, should have succeeded each other with startling rapidity, throwing up their appointments and doffing his lordship's livery, without regard to their own welfare or their employer's convenience, but in accordance with some Quixotic notions of respect for their office and loyalty to their order.

Thus it came about that a subordinate in rank, holding the appointment of second footman, had been so lately enlisted as not yet to have made himself acquainted with the personal appearance of his master; and it speaks well for the amiable disposition of this recruit that, although his liveries were not made, he should, during the temporary absence of a fellow-servant, who was curling his whiskers below, have consented to answer the door.

Lord Bearwarden had rung like any other arrival; but it must be allowed that his composure was somewhat ruffled when refused admittance by his own servant to his own house.

"Her ladyship's not at home, I tell ye," said the man, apparently resenting the freedom with which this stranger proceeded into the hall, while he placed his own massive person in the way; "and if you want to seē my lord, you just can't—*that* I know!"

"Why?" asked his master, beginning to suspect how the land lay, and considerably amused.

"Because his lordship's particularly engaged. He's having his 'air cut just now, and the dentist's waiting to see him after he's done," returned this imaginative retainer, arguing indeed from his pertinacity that the visitor must be one of the swell mob, therefore to be kept out at any cost.

"And who are *you?*" said his lordship, now laughing outright.

"Who am I?" repeated the man. "I'm his lordship's footman. Now, then, who are *you?* That's more like it!"

"I'm Lord Bearwarden himself," replied his master.

"Lord Bearwarden! O! I dare say," was the unexpected rejoinder. "Well, that *is* a good one. Come, young man, none of these games here: there's a policeman round the corner."

At this juncture the fortunate arrival of the gentleman with lately-curled whiskers, in search of his *Bell's Life*, left on the hall-table, produced an *éclaircissement* much to the unbeliever's confusion, and the master of the house was permitted to ascend his own staircase without further obstruction.

Meeting "Gentleman Jim" coming down with a bundle, it did not strike him as the least extraordinary that his wife should have denied herself to other visitors. Slight as was his experience of women and their ways, he had yet learned to respect those various rites that constitute the mystery of shopping, appreciating the composure and undisturbed attention indispensable to a satisfactory performance of that ceremony.

But it *did* trouble him to observe on Lady Bearwarden's

face traces of recent emotion, even, he thought, to tears. She turned quickly aside when he came into the room, busying herself with the blinds and muslin window-curtains; but he had a quick eye, and his perceptions were sharpened besides by an affection he was too proud to admit, while racked with cruel misgivings that it might not be returned.

"Gentleman-like man *that*, I met just now on the stairs!" he began, good-humouredly enough, though in a certain cold, conventional tone, that Maud knew too well, and hated accordingly. "Dancing partner, swell mob, smuggler, respectable tradesman, what is he? Ought to sell cheap, I should say. Looks as if he stole the things ready made. Hope you've done good business with him, my lady? May I see the plunder?" He never called her Maud; it was always "my lady," as if they had been married for twenty years. How she longed for an endearing word, slipping out, as it were, by accident—for a covert smile, an occasional caress. Perhaps had these been lavished more freely she might have rated them at a lower value.

Lady Bearwarden was not one of those women who can tell a lie without the slightest hesitation, calmly satisfied that "the end justifies the means"; neither did it form a part of her creed that a lie by implication is less dishonourable than a lie direct. On the contrary, her nature was exceedingly frank, even defiant, and from pride, perhaps, rather than principle, she scorned no baseness so heartily as duplicity. Therefore she hesitated now and changed colour, looking guilty and confused, but taking refuge, as usual, in self-assertion.

"I had business with the man," she answered haughtily, "or you would not have found him here. I might have got rid of him sooner, perhaps, if I had known you were to be home so early. I'm sure I hate shopping, I hate tradespeople, I hate——"

She was going to say "I hate everything," but stopped herself in time. Counting her married life as yet only by weeks, it would have sounded too ungracious, too ungrateful!

"Why should you do anything you hate?" said her

husband, very kindly, and to all appearance dismissing every suspicion from his mind, though deep in his heart rankled the cruel conviction that between them this strange, mysterious barrier increased day by day. "I want you to have as little of the rough and as much of the smooth in life as is possible. All the ups and none of the downs, my lady. If this fellow bores you, tell them not to let him in again. That second footman will keep him out like a dragon, I'll be bound." Then he proceeded laughingly to relate his own adventure with his new servant in the hall.

He seemed cordial, kind, good-humoured enough, but his tone was that of man to man, brother officer to comrade, not of a lover to his mistress, a husband to his lately-married wife.

She felt this keenly, though at the same time she could appreciate his tact, forbearance, and generosity in asking no more questions about her visitor. To have shown suspicion of Maud would have been at once to drive her to extremities, while implicit confidence put her on honour and rendered her both unable and unwilling to deceive. Never since their first acquaintance had she found occasion to test this quality of trust in her husband, and now it seemed that he possessed it largely, like a number of other manly characteristics. That he was brave, loyal, and generous she had discovered already; handsome and of high position she knew long ago, or she would never have resolved on his capture; and what was there wanting to complete her perfect happiness? Only one thing, she answered herself; but for it she would so willingly have bartered all the rest—that he should love her as Dick Stanmore did. Poor Dick Stanmore! how badly she had treated him, and perhaps this was to be her punishment.

"Bearwarden," she said, crossing the room to lean on the arm of his chair, "we've got to dine at your aunt's to-night. I suppose they will be very late. I wish there were no such things as dinners, don't you?"

"Not when I've missed luncheon, as I did to-day," answered his lordship, whose appetite was like that of any other healthy man under forty.

"I hoped you wouldn't," she observed, in rather a low

voice; "it was very dull without you. We see each other so seldom, somehow. I should like to go to the play to-morrow—you and I, Darby and Joan—I don't care which house, nor what the play is."

"To-morrow," he answered, with a bright smile. "All right, my lady, I'll send for a box. I forgot, though, I can't go to-morrow, I'm on guard."

Her face fell, but she turned away that he might not detect her disappointment, and began to feed her bullfinch in the window.

"You're always on guard, I think," said she, after a pause. "I wonder you like it: surely it must be a dreadful tie. You lost your grouse-shooting this year and the Derby, didn't you? all to sit in plate armour and jack-boots at that gloomiest and stuffiest of Horse Guards. Bearwarden, I—I wish you'd give up the regiment, I do indeed."

When Maud's countenance wore a pleading expression, as now, it was more than beautiful, it was lovely. Looking in her face it seemed to him that it was the face of an angel.

"Do you honestly wish it?" he replied gently. "I would do a great deal to please you, my lady; but—no—I couldn't do *that*."

"He can't really care for me; I knew it all along," thought poor Maud, but she only looked up at him rather wistfully and held her peace.

He was gazing miles away, through the window, through the opposite houses, their offices, their washing-ground, and the mews at the back. She had never seen him look so grave; she had never seen that soft, sad look on his face before. She wondered now that she could ever have regarded that face as a mere encumbrance and accessory to be taken with a coronet and twenty thousand a year.

"Would you like to know why I cannot make this sacrifice to please you?" he asked, in a low, serious voice. "I think you *ought* to know, my lady, and I will tell you. I'm fond of soldiering, of course. I've been brought up to the trade—that's nothing. So I am of hunting, shooting, rackets, cricketing, London porter, and dry champagne;

but I'd give them up, each and all, at a moment's notice, if it made you any happier for ten minutes. I *am* a little ambitious, I grant, and the only fame I would care much for is a soldier's. Still, even if my chance of military distinction were ten times as good I shouldn't grudge losing it for your sake. No: what makes me stick to the regiment is what makes a fellow take a life-buoy on board ship —the instinct of self-preservation. When everything else goes down he's got that to cling to, and can have a fight for his life. Once, my lady, long before I had ever seen you, it was my bad luck to be very unhappy. I didn't howl about it at the time, I'm not going to howl about it now. Simply, all at once, in a day, an hour, everything in the world turned from a joy to a misery and a pain. If my mother hadn't taught me better, I should have taken the quickest remedy of all. If I hadn't had the regiment to fall back upon I must have gone mad. The kindness of my brother officers I never can forget; and to go down the ranks scanning the bold, honest faces of the men, feeling that we had cast our lot in together, and when the time came would all play the same stake, win or lose, reminded me that there were others to live for besides myself, and that I had not lost everything, while yet a share remained invested in our joint venture. When I lay awake in my barrack-room at night I could hear the stamp and snort of the old black troopers, and it did me good. I don't know the reason, but it did me good. You will think I was very unhappy—so I was."

"But why?" asked Maud, shrewdly guessing, and at the same time dreading the answer.

"Because I was a fool, my lady," replied her husband —"a fool of the very highest calibre. You have, no doubt, discovered that in this world folly is punished far more severely than villainy. Deceive others, and you prosper well enough; allow yourself to be deceived, and you're pitched into as if you were the greatest rogue unhung. It's not a subject for you and me to talk about, my lady. I only mentioned it to show you why I am so unwilling to leave the army. Why, I *dare* not do it, even to please you."

"But"—she hesitated, and her voice came very soft

and low—"you—you are not afraid—I mean you don't think it likely, do you, that you will ever be so unhappy again? It was about—about somebody that you cared for, I suppose."

She got it out with difficulty, and already hated that unknown Somebody with an unreasoning hatred, such as women think justifiable and even meritorious in like cases.

He laughed a harsh, forced laugh.

"What a fool you must think me," said he: "I ought never to have told you. Yes, it was about a woman, of course. You did not fancy I could be so soft, did you? Don't let us talk about it. I'll tell you in three words, and then will never mention the subject again. I trusted and believed in her. She deceived me, and that sort of thing puts a fellow all wrong, you know, unless he's very good-tempered, and I suppose I'm not. It's never likely to happen again, but still, blows of all sorts fall upon people when they least expect them, and that's why I can't give up the old corps, but shall stick by it to the last."

"Are you sure you haven't forgiven her?" asked Maud, inwardly trembling for an answer.

"Forgiven her!" repeated his lordship; "well, I've forgiven her like a Christian, as they say—perhaps even more fully than that. I don't wish her any evil. I wouldn't do her a bad turn, but as for ever thinking of her or caring for her afterwards, that was impossible. No. While I confided in her freely and fully, while I gave up for her sake everything I prized and cared for in the world, while I was even on the verge of sending in my papers because it seemed to be her wish I should leave the regiment, she had her own secret hidden up from me all the time. That showed what she was. No; I don't think I could ever forgive *that*—except *as a Christian*, you know, my lady!"

He ended in a light sarcastic tone, for like most men who have lived much in the world, he had acquired a habit of discussing the gravest and most painful subjects with conventional coolness, originating perhaps in our national dislike of anything sentimental or dramatic in situation. He could have written probably eloquently and seriously enough, but to "speak like a book" would have

lowered him, in his own esteem, as being unmanly no less than ungentlemanlike.

Maud's heart ached very painfully. A secret then, kept from him by the woman he trusted, was the one thing he could not pardon. Must this indeed be her punishment? Day by day to live with this honourable, generous nature, learning to love it so dearly, and yet so hopelessly, because of the great gulf fixed by her own desperate venture, risked, after all, that she might win *him!* For a moment, under the influence of that great tide of love which swelled up in her breast, she felt as if she must put her whole life's happiness on one desperate throw, and abide the result. Make a clean breast, implore his forgiveness, and tell him all.

She had been wandering about while he spoke, straightening a table-cover here, snipping a dead leaf off a geranium there, and otherwise fidgeting to conceal her emotion. Now she walked across the room to her husband's side, and in another minute perhaps the whole truth would have been out, and these two might have driven off to dinner in their brougham, the happiest couple in London; but the door was thrown wide open, and the student of *Bell's Life*, on whose whiskers the time employed in curling them had obviously not been thrown away, announced to her ladyship, with much pomp, that her carriage was at the door.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Maud, "and your aunt is always so punctual. You must dress in ten minutes, Bearwarden. I'm certain I can. Run down this moment, and don't stop to answer a single letter if it's a case of life and death."

And Lady Bearwarden, casting all other thoughts to the winds in the present emergency, hurried up-stairs after the pretty little feet of her French maid, whose anxiety that her lady should not be late, and perhaps a certain curiosity to know the cause of delay, had tempted her down at least as far as the first landing, while my lord walked to his dressing-room on the ground-floor, with the comfortable conviction that he might spend a good half-hour at his toilet, and would then be ready a considerable time before his wife.

The reflections that chased each other through the pretty head of the latter while subjected to Justine's skilful manipulations, I will not take upon me to detail. I may state, however, that the dress she chose to wear was trimmed with Bearwarden's favourite colour; that she carried a bunch of his favourite flowers on her breast and another in her hair.

A brougham drawn by a pair of long, low, high-stepping horses, at the rate of twelve miles an hour, is an untoward vehicle for serious conversation when taking its occupants out to dinner, although well adapted for tender confidence or mutual recrimination on its return from a party at night. Lady Bearwarden could not even make sure that her husband observed she had consulted his taste in dress. Truth to tell, Lord Bearwarden was only conscious that his wife looked exceedingly handsome, and that he wished they were going to dine at home. Marriage had made him very slow, and this inconvenient wish lasted him all through dinner, notwithstanding that it was his enviable lot to sit by a fast young lady of the period, who rallied him with exceeding good taste on his wife, his house, his furniture, manners, dress, horses, and everything that was his. Once, in extremity of boredom, he caught sight of Maud's delicate profile five couples off, and fancied he could detect on the pale, pure face something of his own weariness and abstraction. After that the fast young lady "went at him," as she called it, in vain. Later, in the drawing-room, she told another damsel of her kind that "Bruin's marriage had utterly spoilt him. Simply ruination, my dear! So unlike men in general. What he could see in her I can't make out! She looks like death, and she's not *very* well dressed, in my opinion. I wonder if she bullies him. He used to be such fun. So fast, so cheery, so delightfully satirical, and as wicked as Sin!"

Maud went home in the brougham by herself. After a tedious dinner, lasting through a couple of hours, enlivened by the conversation of a man he can't understand, and the persecutions of a woman who bores him, it is natural for the male human subject to desire tobacco, and a walk home in order to smoke. Somehow, the male human subject never does walk straight home with its cigar.

Bearwarden, like others of his class, went off to Pratt's, where, we will hope, he was amused, though he did not look it. A cigar on a close evening leads to soda-water, with a slice of lemon, and, I had almost forgotten to add, a small modicum of gin. This entails another cigar, and it is wonderful how soon one o'clock in the morning comes round again. When Lord Bearwarden turned out of St. James's Street it was too late to think of anything but immediate bed. Her ladyship's confessions, if she had any to make, must be put off till breakfast-time, and, alas! by *her* breakfast-time, which was none of the earliest, my lord was well down in his sheepskin, riding out of the barrack-gate in command of his guard.

"Fronte capillatâ post est Occasio calav!"

Bald-pated Father Time had succeeded in slipping his forelock out of Maud's hand the evening before, and, henceforth, behind his bare and mocking skull, those delicate, disappointed fingers must close on empty air in vain!

CHAPTER XXI

FURENS QUID FŒMINA

We left Tom Ryfe, helpless, unconscious, more dead than alive, supported between a man and woman up a back street in Westminster: we must return to him after a considerable interval, pale, languid, but convalescent, on a sofa in his own room under his uncle's roof. He is only now beginning to understand that he has been dangerously ill; that according to his doctor nothing but a "splendid constitution" and unprecedented medical skill have brought him back from the threshold of that grim portal known as death's door. This he does not quite believe, but is aware, nevertheless, that he is much enfeebled, and that his system has sustained what he himself calls "a deuced awkward shake." Even now he retains no very clear idea of what happened to him. He remembers vaguely, as in a dream, certain bare walls of a dim and gloomy chamber, tapestried with cobwebs, smelling of damp and mould like a vault, certain broken furniture, shabby and scarce, on a bare brick floor, with a grate in which no fire could have been kindled without falling into the middle of the room. He recalls that racking head-ache, that scorching thirst, and those pains in all the bones of a wan, wasted figure lying under a patchwork quilt on a squalid bed. A figure, independent of, and dissevered from himself, yet in some degree identified with his thoughts, his sufferings, and his memories. Somebody nursed the figure, too—he is sure of that—bringing it water, medicines, food, and leeches for its aching temples; smoothing its pillow and arranging

its bed-clothes, in those endless nights, so much longer, yet scarce more dismal than the days,—somebody, whose voice he never heard, whose face he never saw, yet in whose slow, cautious tread there seemed a familiar sound. Once, in delirium, he insisted it was Miss Bruce, but even *through* that delirium he knew he must be raving, and it was impossible. Could that be a part of his dream, too, in which he dragged himself out of bed, to dress in his own clothes, laid out on the chair that had hitherto carried a basin of gruel or a jug of cooling drink? No, it must have been reality surely, for even to-day he has so vivid a remembrance of the fresh air, the blinding sunshine, and the homely life-like look of that four-wheeled cab waiting in the narrow street, which he entered mechanically, which *as* mechanically brought him home to his uncle's house, the man asking no questions, nor stopping to receive his fare. To be sure, he fainted from utter weakness at the door. Of that he is satisfied, for he remembers nothing between the jolting of those slippery cushions and another bed in which he found himself, with a grave doctor watching over him, and which he recognised, doubtfully, as his own.

Gradually, with returning strength, Tom began to suspect the truth that he had been hocussed and robbed. His pockets, when he resumed his clothes, were empty. Their only contents, his cigar-case and Miss Bruce's letter, were gone. The motive for so desperate an attack he felt unable to fathom. His intellect was still affected by bodily weakness, and he inclined at first to think he had been mistaken for somebody else. The real truth only dawned on him by degrees. Its first ray originated with no less brilliant a luminary than old Bargrave.

To do him justice, the uncle had shown far more natural affection than his household had hitherto believed him capable of feeling. During his nephew's absence, he had been like one distracted, and the large reward offered for discovery of the missing gentleman sufficiently testified his anxiety and alarm. When Tom did return, more dead than alive, Bargrave hurried off in person to procure the best medical advice, and postponing inquiry into his wrongs to the more immediate necessity of nursing the sufferer,

spent six or seven hours out of the twenty-four at the sick man's bedside.

The first day Tom could sit up his uncle thought well to enliven him with a little news, social, general, and professional. Having told him that he had outbid Mortlake for the last batch of poor Mr. Chalkstone's port, and stated, at some length, his reasons for doubting the stability of Government, he entered gleefully upon congenial topics, and proceeded to give the invalid a general sketch of business affairs during his retirement.

"I've worked the coach, Tom," said he, walking up and down the room, waving his coat-tails, "as well as it *could* be worked, single-handed. I don't think you'll find a screw loose anywhere. Ah, Tom! an old head, you know, is worth a many pair of hands. When you're well enough, in a week or so, my lad, I shall like to show you how I've kept everything going, though I was so anxious, terribly anxious, all the time. The only matter that's been left what you call *in statu quo* is that business of Miss Bruce's, which I had nothing to do with. It will last you a good while yet, Tom, though it's of less importance to her now, poor thing!—don't you move, Tom—I'll hand you the barley-water—because she's Miss Bruce no longer."

Tom gasped, and hid his pale, thin face in the jug of barley-water. He had some pluck about him, after all; for weak and ill as he was he managed to get out an indifferent question.

"Not Miss Bruce, isn't she? Ah! I hadn't heard. Who is she then, uncle? I suppose you mean she's—she's married." He was so husky, no wonder he took another pull at the barley-water.

"Yes, she's married," answered his uncle, in the indifferent tone with which threescore years and odd can discuss that fatality. "Made a good marriage, too—an excellent marriage. What do you think of a peerage, my boy? She's Viscountess Bearwarden now. Twenty thousand a year, if it's a penny. I am sure of it, for I was concerned in a lawsuit of the late lord's twenty years ago. I don't suppose you're acquainted with her husband, Tom. Not in our circle, you know; but a most respectable young man, I understand, and likely to be lord-lieutenant of his

county before long. I'm sure I trust she'll be happy. And now, Tom, as you seem easy and comfortable, perhaps you'd like to go to sleep for a little. If you want anything you can reach the bell, and I'll come and see you again before I dress for dinner."

Easy and comfortable! When the door shut behind his uncle, Tom bowed his head upon the table and gave way completely. He was unmanned by illness, and the shock had been too much for him. It was succeeded, however, and that pretty quickly, by feelings of bitter wrath and resentment, which did more to restore his strength than all the tonics in the world. An explanation, too, seemed now afforded to much that had so mystified him of late. What if, rendered desperate by his threats, Miss Bruce had been in some indirect manner the origin of his captivity and illness—Miss Bruce, the woman who of all others owed him the largest debt of gratitude (like most people, Tom argued from his own side of the question); for whom he had laboured so unremittingly, and was willing to sacrifice so much? Could it be so? And if it was, should he not be justified in going to any extremity for revenge? Revenge—yes, that was all he had to live for now; and the very thought seemed to put new vigour into his system, infuse fresh blood in his veins. So is it with all baser spirits; and perhaps in the indulgence of this cowardly craving they obtain a more speedy relief than nobler natures from the first agony of suffering; but their cure is not and never can be permanent; and to them must remain unknown that strange wild strain of some unearthly music which thrills through those sore hearts that can repay good for evil, kindly interest for cold indifference; that, true to themselves and their own honour, can continue to love a memory, though it be but the memory of a dream. Tom felt as if he could make an exceedingly high bid, involving probity, character, good faith, and the whole of his moral code, for an auxiliary who should help him in his vengeance. Assistance was at hand even now, in an unexpected moment and an unlooked-for shape.

"A person wishes to see you, sir, if you're well enough," said a little housemaid who had volunteered to provide for

the wants of the invalid, and took very good care of him indeed.

"What sort of a person?" asked Tom languidly, feeling, nevertheless, that any distraction would be a relief.

"Well, sir," replied the maid, "it seems a respectable person, I should say. Like a sick-nurse or what not."

There is no surmise so wild but that a rejected lover will grasp at and connect it with the origin of his disappointment. "I'll see her," said Tom stoutly, not yet despairing but that it might be a messenger from Maud.

He certainly *was* surprised when Dorothea, whom he recognised at once, even in her Sunday clothes, entered the room, with a wandering eye and a vacillating step.

"You'll never forgive me, Master Tom," was her startling salutation. "It's me as nursed you through it; but you'll never forgive me—never! And I don't deserve as you should."

Dorothea was nervous, hysterical, but she steadied herself bravely, though her fingers worked and trembled under her faded shawl.

Tom stared, and his visitor went on—

"You'd 'a died for sure if I hadn't. Don't ye cast it up to me, Master Tom. I've been punished enough. Punished! If I was to bare my arm now I could show you weals that's more colours and brighter than your neckankercher there. I've been served worse nor that, though, since. I ain't a-goin' to put up with it no longer. Master Tom, do you know as you've been put upon, and by who?"

His senses were keenly on the alert. "Tell me the truth, my good girl," said he, "and I'll forgive you all your share. More, I'll stick by you through thick and thin."

She whimpered a little, affected by the kindness of his tone, but tugging harder at her shawl, proceeded to further confessions.

"You was hocussed, Master Tom; and I can point out to you the man as did it. You'd 'a been murdered amongst 'em if it hadn't been for me. Who was it, d'ye think, as nussed of you, and cared for you, all through, and laid out your clothes ready brushed and folded, and went and got you a cab the day as you come back here? Master Tom, I've been put upon too. Put upon and deceived, as never

yet was born woman used so bad; and it's my turn now! Look ye here, Master Tom. It's that villain, Jim—Gentleman Jim, as we calls him—what's been at the bottom of this here. And yet there's worse than Jim in it too. There's others that set Jim on. O! to believe as a fine handsome chap like him could turn out to be so black-hearted, and such a soft too. She'll never think no more of him, for all his comely face, than the dirt beneath her feet."

"*She!*" repeated Tom, intensely interested, and therefore preternaturally calm. "What d'ye mean by *she?* Don't fret, that's a good girl, and don't excite yourself. Tell your story your own way, you know, but keep as quiet as you can. You're safe enough here."

"We'd been asked in church," replied Dorothea, somewhat inconsequently. "Ah! more than once, we had. And I'd ha' been as true to him, and was, as ever a needle to a stitch. Well, sir, when he slights of me, and leaves of me, why it's natural as I should run up and down the streets a-lookin' for him like wild. So one day, after I'd done my work, and put things straight, for I never was one of your sluttish ones, Master Tom—and your uncle, he's always been a kind gentleman to me, and a haffable, like yourself, Master Tom—according, I comes upon my Jim at the Sunflower, and I follows him unbeknown for miles and miles right away to the West-End. So he never looks behind him, nor he never stops, o' course, till he comes to Belgrave Square; and he turns down a street as I couldn't read its name, but should know it again as well as I know my own hand. And then, Master Tom, if you'll believe me, I thought as I must have dropped."

"Well?" said Tom, not prepared to be satisfied with this climax, though his companion stopped, as if she had got to the end of her disclosures.

"Well indeed!" resumed Dorothea, after a considerable interval, "when he come that far, I know'd as he must be up to some of his games, and I watched. They lets him into a three-storied house, and I sees him in the best parlour with a lady, speaking up to her, but not half so bold as usual. He's not often dashed, Jim isn't. I will say that for him."

"What sort of a lady?" asked Tom, quivering with excitement. "You took a good look at her, I'll be bound!"

"Well, a real lady in a muslin dress," answered Dorothea. "A tall young lady—not much to boast of for looks, but with hair as black as your hat and a face as white as cream. Very 'aughty too an' arbitrary, and seemed to have my Jim like quite at her command. So from where I stood I couldn't help hearing everything that passed. My Jim, he gives her the very letter as laid in your pocket that night, as you—as you was taken so poorly, you know. And from what she said and what he said, and putting this and that together, I'm sure as they got you out of the way between them, Master Tom, and gammoned me into the job too, when I'd rather have cut both my hands off, if I'd only known the truth."

Tom sat back on his sofa, shutting his eyes that he might concentrate his powers of reflection. Yes, it was all clear enough at last. The nature and origin of the outrage to which he had been subjected were obvious, nor could he entertain any further doubt of Maud's motives, though marvelling exceedingly, as well he might, at her courage, her recklessness, and the social standing of her accomplice. It seemed to him as if he could forgive every one concerned but her. This poor woman who had fairly thrown herself on his mercy: the ruffian whose grip had been at his throat, but who might hereafter prove as efficient an ally as he had been a formidable enemy. Only let him have Maud in his power, that was all he asked, praying him to spare her, kneeling at his feet, and then without a shade of compunction to ruin, and crush, and humble her to the dust!

He saw his way presently, but he must work warily, he told himself, and use all the tools that came to his hand.

"If you can clear the matter up, Dorothea," said he, kindly, "I will not visit your share in it on your head, as I have already told you. Indeed I believe I owe you my life. But this man you mention, this Gentleman Jim as you call him, can you find him? Do you know where he is? My poor girl! I think I understand. Surely you deserved better treatment at his hands."

The kind words produced this time no softening effect, and Tom knew enough of human nature to feel sure that she was bent on revenge as earnestly as himself, while he also knew that he must take advantage of her present humour at once, for it might change in an hour.

"If I could lay my hand on him," answered Dorothea fiercely, "it's likely I'd leave my mark! I've looked for him now, high and low, every evening and many arternoons, better nor a week. I ain't come on him yet, the false-hearted thief! but I seen *her* only the day before yesterday, seen her walk into a house in Berners Street as bold as you please. I watched and waited better nor two hours, for, thinks I, he won't be long follerin'; and I seen her come out agin with a gentleman, a comely young gentleman; I'd know him anywheres, but he warn't like my Jim."

"Are you sure it was the same lady?" asked Tom eagerly, but ashamed of putting so unnecessary a question when he saw the expression of Dorothea's face.

"Am I *sure?*" said she, with a short gasping laugh. "Do you suppose as a woman can be mistook as has been put upon like me? Lawyers is clever men, askin' your pardon, Mr. Ryfe, but there's not much sense in such a question as yours: I seen the lady, sir, and I seen the house; that's enough for *me!*"

"And you observed the gentleman narrowly?" continued Tom, stifling down a little pang of jealousy that was surely unreasonable now.

"Well, I didn't take much notice of the gentleman," answered Dorothea wearily, for the reaction was coming on apace. "It warn't my Jim, I know. You and me has both been used bad, Master Tom, and it's a shame, it is. But the weather's uncommon close, and it's a long walk here, and I'm a'most fit to drop, askin' your pardon, sir. I wrote down the number of the 'ouse, Master Tom, to make sure—there it is. If you please, I'll go down-stairs, and ask the servants for a cup o' tea, and I wish you a good arternoon, sir, and am glad to see you lookin' a trifle better at last."

So Dorothea departed to enjoy the luxury of strong tea and unlimited gossip with Mr. Bargrave's household, draw-

ing largely on her invention in explanation of her recent interview, but affording them no clue to the real object of her visit.

Tom Ryfe was still puzzled. That Maud (he could not endure to think of her as Lady Bearwarden)—that Maud should, so soon after her marriage, be seen going about London by herself under such questionable circumstances was strange, to say the least of it, even making allowances for her recklessness and wilful disposition, of which no one could be better aware than himself. What could be her object? though he loved her so fiercely in his own way, he had no great opinion of her discretion; and now, in the bitterness of his anger, was prepared to put the very worst construction upon everything she did. He recalled, painfully enough, a previous occasion on which he had met her, as he believed, walking with a stranger in the Park, and did not forget her displeasure while cutting short his inquiries on the subject. After all, it occurred to him almost immediately, that the person with whom she had been lately seen was probably her own husband. He would not himself have described Lord Bearwarden exactly as a "comely young gentleman," but on the subject of manly beauty Dorothea's taste was probably more reliable than his own. If so, however, what could they be doing in Berners Street? Pshaw! How this illness had weakened his intellect! Having her picture painted, of course! what else could bring a doting couple, married only a few weeks, to that part of the town? He cursed Dorothea bitterly for her ridiculous surmises and speculations—cursed the fond pair—cursed his own wild unconquerable folly—cursed the day he first set eyes on that fatal beauty, so maddening to his senses, so destructive to his heart; and thus cursing staggered across the room to take his strengthening draught, looked at his pale, worn face in the glass, and sat down again to think.

The doctor had visited him at noon, and stated with proper caution that in a day or two, if amendment still progressed satisfactorily, "carriage exercise," as he called it, might be taken with undoubted benefit to the invalid. We all know, none better than medical men themselves, that if your doctor says you may get up to-morrow, you

jump out of bed the moment his back is turned. Tom Ryfe, worried, agitated, unable to rest where he was, resolved that he would take his carriage exercise without delay, and to the housemaid's astonishment, indeed much against her protest, ordered a hansom cab to the door at once.

Though so weak he could not dress without assistance, he no sooner found himself on the move, and out of doors, than he began to feel stronger and better; he had no object in driving beyond change of scene, air, and exercise; but it will not surprise those who have suffered from the cruel thirst and longing which accompanies such mental maladies as his, that he should have directed the cabman to proceed to Berners Street.

It sometimes happens that when we thus "draw a bow at a venture" our random shaft hits the mark we might have aimed at for an hour in vain. Tom Ryfe esteemed it an unlooked-for piece of good fortune that turning out of Oxford Street he should meet another hansom going at speed in an opposite direction, and containing—yes, he could have sworn to them before any jury in England—the faces, very near each other, of Lady Bearwarden and Dick Stanmore.

It was enough. Dorothea's statement seemed sufficiently corroborated, and after proceeding to the number she indicated, as if to satisfy himself that the house had not walked bodily away, Mr. Ryfe returned home very much benefited in his own opinion by the drive, though the doctor, visiting his patient next day, was disappointed to find him still low and feverish, altogether not so much better as he expected.

CHAPTER XXII

"NOT FOR JOSEPH"

BUT Dick Stanmore was *not* in a hansom with Lady Bearwarden. Shall I confess, to the utter destruction of his character for undying constancy, that he did not wish to be?

Dick had been cured at last—cured of the painful disease he once believed mortal—cured by a course of sanitary treatment, delightful in its process, unerring in its results; and he walked about now with the buoyant step, the cheerful air of one who has been lightened of a load lying next his heart.

Medical discoveries have of late years brought into vogue a science of which I have borrowed the motto for these volumes. *Similia similibus curantur* is the maxim of homœopathy; and whatever success this healing principle may obtain with bodily ailments, I have little doubt of its efficacy in affections of the heart. I do not mean to say its precepts will render us invulnerable or immortal. There are constitutions that, once shaken, can never be restored; there are characters that, once outraged, become saddened for evermore. The fairest flowers and the sweetest, are those which, if trampled down, never hold up their heads again. But I do mean, that should man or woman be capable of cure under sufferings originating in misplaced confidence, such cure is most readily effected by a modified attack of the same nature, at the risk of misplacing it again.

After Dick Stanmore's first visit to the painting-room

in Berners Street, it was astonishing how enthusiastic a taste he contracted for art. He was never tired of contemplating his friend's great picture, and Simon used laughingly to declare the amateur knew every line and shade of colour in his Fairy Queen as accurately as the painter. He remained in London at a season which could have afforded few attractions for a young man of his previous habits, and came every day to the painting-room as regularly as the model herself. Thus it fell out that Dick, religiously superintending the progress of this Fairy Queen, found his eyes wandering perpetually from the representation on canvas to its original on Miss Algernon's shoulders, and gratified his sense of sight with less scruple, that from the very nature of her occupation she was compelled to keep her head always turned one way.

It must have been agreeable for Nina, no doubt, if not improving, to listen to Dick's light and rather trivial conversation, which relieved the monotony of her task, and formed a cheerful addition to the short, jerking, preoccupied sentences of the artist, enunciated obviously at random, and very often with a brush in his mouth. Nor was it displeasing, I imagine, to be aware of Mr. Stanmore's admiration, forsaking day by day its loudly-declared allegiance to the Fairy Queen in favour of her living prototype, deepening gradually to long intervals of silence, sweeter, more embarrassing, while far more eloquent than words.

And all the time, Simon, the chivalrous, painted on. I cannot believe but that, with the jealous instinct of true affection, he must have perceived the ground slipping away, hour by hour, from beneath his feet—must have seen the ship that carried all his cargo sailing farther and farther into a golden distance to leave him desolate on the darkening shore. How his brain may have reeled, and his heart ached, it is not for me to speculate. There is a decency of courage, as there is an extravagance of bravado, and that is the true spirit of chivalry which bleeds to death unmoved, beneath its armour, keeping the pale knightly face turned calm and constant towards the foe.

It was a strange trio, that, in the painting-room. The garden of Eden seems to have been originally intended for two. The third was doubtless an intruder, and from that

day to this how many a paradise has been lost by admittance of the visitor who completes this uneven number, unaccountably supposed to be so productive of good fortune.

Curious cross purposes were at work in the three heads grouped so near each other opposite the painter's glowing canvas. Dick perhaps was the least perceptive and therefore the happiest of the party. His sense of well-being, indeed, seemed enhanced by his previous troubles: like a man who comes out of the cold into the glow of a comforting fire, he abandoned himself without much reflection to the positive enjoyment of pleasure and the negative solace of relief from pain.

Simon, always painting, fought hard to keep down that little leavening of self which constitutes our very identity. Under the cold impassive vigour he was so determined to preserve, he registered many a noble vow of fortitude and abnegation on behalf of the friend he valued, of the woman he loved. Sometimes a pang would shoot through him painfully enough while he marked a change of Nina's colour, a little flutter of manner, a little trembling of her hands, and felt that she was already more affected by the presence of this comparative stranger than she had ever shown herself by his, who had cared for her so tenderly, worshipped her so long. Then he bent all his faculties on the picture, and like a child running to seize its mother's gown, took refuge with his art.

That mistress did not fail him. She never does fail the true worshipper, who kneels consistently at her shrine. It is not for her to scorn the homage offered to-day because it has been offered in faith and loyalty during many a long-past year. It is not for her to shed on the new votary her sweetest smiles only because he *is* new. Woo her frankly, love her dearly, and serve her faithfully, she will insure you from being cozened out of your reward. Had she not taken care of Simon at this period, I scarcely know what would have become of him.

Nina, too, lived in a golden dream, from which it was her only fear that she must soon awake. Ere long, she sometimes thought, she must ask herself who was this stranger that brought with him a flood of sunshine into the homely painting-room? that steeped for her, uncon-

sciously and without effort, every day in happiness, every morning in hope? She put off asking the question, having perhaps a wholesome recollection of him who, going to count his treasure of fairy gold, found it only withered leaves, and let herself float with the stream, in that enjoyment of the present which is enhanced rather than modified by misgivings for the future. Nina was very happy, that is the honest truth, and even her beauty seemed to brighten like the bloom on a flower, opening to the smile of spring.

Simon marked the change. How could he help it? And still he painted—painted on.

"There!" exclaimed the artist, with a sigh of relief, as he stepped back from his picture, stretching both weary arms above his head. "At last—at last! If I only like it to-morrow as well as I do now, not another touch shall go into it anywhere above the chin. It's the expression I've been trying to catch for months. There it is! Doubt, sorrow, remorse, and, through it all, the real undying love of the—— Well, that's all cant! I mean—— Can't you see that she likes him awfully even now? Nina, you've been the making of me, you're the best sitter in the world, and while I look at my picture I begin to think you're the handsomest. I mustn't touch it again. Stanmore, what do you think?"

Absorbed in contemplation of his work, he paid little attention to the answer, which was so far fortunate, that Dick, in his preoccupation, faltered out a string of contradictory criticisms, flattering neither to the original nor the copy. Nina indeed suggested, with some truth, that he had made the eyebrows too dark, but this remark appeared to originate only in a necessity for something to say. These two young people seemed unusually shy and ill at ease. Perhaps in each of the three hearts beating there before the picture lurked some vague suspicion that its wistful expression, so lately caught, may have been owing to corresponding feelings lately awakened in the model; and, if so, why should not two of them have thrilled with happiness, though the third might ache in loneliness and despair?

"Not another stroke of work will I do to-day," said the

artist, affecting a cheerfulness which perhaps he did not feel. "Nina, you've got to be back early. I'll have a half-holiday for once and take you home. Put your bonnet on: I shall be ready in five minutes when I've washed my hands."

Dick's face fell. He had counted on a couple more hours at least. Women, when they are really disappointed, rarely show it, and perhaps he felt a little hurt to observe how readily, and with what apparent goodwill, Miss Algernon resumed her out-of-doors attire. He felt hardly sure of his ground yet, or he might have begun to sulk in earnest. No bad plan either, for such little misunderstandings bring on explanations, reconciliations, declarations, all sorts of vexations, every day!

Ladies are stanch believers in luck, and leave much to chance with a devout faith that it will serve them at their need. I imagine Nina thought it quite in the natural course of events that a dirty boy should enter the room at this juncture and deliver a note to Simon, which called forth all his energies and sympathies in a moment. The note, folded in a hurry, written with a pencil, was from a brother artist, and ran thus—

"Dear Simon,

"Come and see me if you *can*. On my back! Two doctors. Not going to be rubbed out, but beastly seedy all the same."

"When was he taken ill? Who's attending him? Anybody taking care of him? What o'clock is it now? Tell him I'll be there in five minutes." Simon delivered himself of these sentences in a breath, and then glanced from Nina to Dick Stanmore.

"I dare say you wouldn't mind," said he. I *must* go to this poor fellow, and if I find him very ill I may be detained till evening. If you've time, Stanmore, could you see Miss Algernon as far as the boat? She'll do very well then, but we don't like her to be wandering about London by herself."

It is possible this idea may have suggested itself to the persons most concerned, for all that they seemed so

supremely unconscious, and as if the arrangement, though a sensible one and convenient, no doubt, were a matter of perfect indifference to themselves.

Dick "would be delighted," of course; though he tried not to look so; and Nina "couldn't think of giving Mr. Stanmore so much trouble." Nevertheless, within ten minutes the two were turning into Oxford Street in a hansom cab; and although they said very little, being indeed in a vehicle which jolted, swung, and rattled inordinately, I have not the least doubt they enjoyed their drive.

They enjoyed the river steamer too, which seems equally strange, with its narrow deck, its tangible smoke, its jerks and snorts, and throbbing vibrations, as it worked its way against the tide. They had never before been alone together, and the situation, though delightful, was at first somewhat embarrassing, because they were in earnest. The restraint, however, soon wore off, and with tongues once loosened there was no lack of matter for their employment. How beautiful, how interesting, how picturesque everything seemed to have grown all at once: the Houses of Parliament—the bridges—the dull, broad surface of the river, grey, with a muddy tinge—the low, level banks—the blunt-nosed barges—their fellow-passengers—the engineer—the boy with the mop—and the dingy funnel of the steamer itself.

How mysterious the charm that lurks in association of ideas! What magic it imparts to the commonest actions, the most vulgar objects of life! What a heart-ache on occasions has it not caused you or me! One of us cannot see a woman fitting on her gloves without a pang. To another there is a memory and a sorrow in the flirt of a fan, the rustle of a dress, the grinding of a barrel-organ, or the slang of a street song. The stinging-nettle crops up in every bed of flowers we raise; the bitter tonic flavours all we eat and drink. I dare say Werther could not munch his bread-and-butter for years in common comfort because of Charlotte. Would it not be wiser for us to ignore the Charlottes of life altogether, and stick to the bread-and-butter?

Too soon that dingy steamer reached its place of dis-

embarkation—too soon, at least, for certain of its passengers; and yet in their short voyage up the river each of these two had passed the portal of a paradise, through which, amongst all its gaudy and luxuriant vegetation, you may search for the tree of knowledge in vain. Not a word was spoken by either that could bear the direct interpretation of love-making, yet each felt that the Rubicon had been passed which must never be recrossed dryshod again.

Dick paid his respects, as seemed but right and proper, to the Misses Perkins, who voted him an exceedingly agreeable young man; and this was the more tolerant on their part that he found very little to say, and had the good taste to be a very short time in saying it. They asked him, indeed, to remain for dinner, and, notwithstanding their hospitable inclinations, were no doubt relieved when he declined. He had gained some experience, you see, from his previous worship of Miss Bruce, which now stood him in good stead, for in affairs of love, as of honour, a man conducts his second with more skill and *savoir faire* than his first.

The world seemed to have changed by magic while he went back to London. It felt like the breaking up of a frost, when all is warmth and softness and vitality once more. He could have talked to himself, and laughed aloud for very joy.

But Nina went to her room, and cried as she had not cried since she was a little child, shedding tears of mingled sweetness and sorrow, rapture and remorse. Her eyes were opened now in her new-found happiness, and she foresaw the crushing blow that happiness must inflict on the oldest, kindest, dearest of friends.

For the first time in her life she took herself to task and examined her own heart. What a joyous heart it was! And yet how could she be so inhuman as to admit a pleasure which must be cruelly productive of another's pain? Here was a person whom she had known, as it were, but yesterday, and his lightest word or glance had already become dearer to her than the wealth of care and affection which tended her from childhood, which would be about her to her grave. It was infamous! she told herself, and yet it was surpassingly sweet! Yes, she loved this man

—this brown-haired, broad-shouldered Mr. Stanmore, of whose existence a fortnight ago she had been perfectly unconscious, and in that love she learned to appreciate and understand the affection loyal, true-hearted Simon lavished on herself. Was he to be sacrificed to this mere stranger? Never! Rather she would sacrifice herself. But the tears flowed faster to think that it would indeed be a sacrifice, an offering up of youth, beauty, hope, happiness for life. Then she dried her eyes, and went down on her knees to pray at her bedside; and so rose up, making certain stern resolutions, which it is only fair to state she afterwards kept—like a woman!

With the view, doubtless, of putting these in practice, she induced Simon to walk with her on the lawn after tea, while the stars were twinkling dimly through a soft, misty sky, and the lazy river lapped and gurgled against the garden banks. He accompanied her, nothing loth, for he too had spent the last hour in hard painful conflict, making, also, stern resolutions, which he kept—like a man! "You found him better," she said, alluding to the cause of his delay in returning home. "I'm so glad. If he hadn't been, you'd have stayed with him all night, I know. Simon, I think you're the best and the kindest person in the world."

Here was an opening. Was she disappointed, or not, that he took so little advantage of it? "We must all help each other, Nina," said he; "that's the way to make life easy and to stifle sorrows, if we have them, of our own."

"*You* ought never to have a sorrow," she broke in. "*You*, who always think of others before yourself—you deserve to be so happy. And, Simon, sometimes I think you're not, and it makes me wretched; and I'd do anything in the world to please you; anything, if—if it wasn't *too* hard a task, you know."

She had been so eager to make her sacrifice and get it over that she hurried inconsiderately to the brink,—then, like a timid bather, stopped short, hesitating—the water looked so cold and dark and deep.

The lightest touch from his hand would have plunged her in, overhead. He would have held it in the fire rather, like the Roman hero, till it shrivelled into ashes.

"My happiness can never be apart from yours," he said, tenderly and sadly. "Yet I think I know now that yours is not entirely bound up in mine. Am I right, Nina?"

"I would do anything in the world for you—anything," she murmured, taking refuge, as we all do at such times, in vain repetition.

They had reached the drawing-room window, and she turned aside, as if she meant to go in. He took her hand lightly in his own, and led her back towards the river. It was very dark, and neither could read the expression of the other's face.

"I have but one earnest desire in the world," said he, speaking distinctly, but very low. "It is to see you happily settled in life. I never had a sister nor a daughter, Nina. You have stood me in the stead of both; and—and I shall never have a wife."

She knew what he meant. The quiet, sad, yet uncomplaining tone cut her to the heart. "It's a shame! it's a shame!" she murmured. "Simon, Simon. Tell me; don't you think me the worst, the most ungrateful, the most horrible girl in the world?"

He spoke cheerfully now, and even laughed. "Very ungrateful," he repeated, pressing her hand kindly; "and very detestable, unless you tell me the truth. Nina, dear Nina, confide in me as if I was your—well—your grandmother! Will that do? I think there's a somebody we saw to-day who likes you very much. He's a good fellow, and to be trusted, I can swear. Don't you think, dear, though you haven't known him long, that *you* like *him* a little—more than a little, already?"

"O, Simon, what a brute I am, and what a fool!" answered the girl, bursting into tears. And then the painter knew that his ship had gone down, and the waters had closed over it for evermore. That evening his aunts thought Simon in better spirits than usual. Nina, though she went to bed before the rest, had never found him kinder, more cheerful, more considerate. He spoke playfully, good-humouredly, on various subjects, and kissed the girl's forehead gravely, almost reverently, when she wished him good-night. It was such a caress as a man lays on the dead face that shall never look in his own again.

The painter slept but little—perhaps not at all. And who shall tell how hard he wrestled with his great sorrow during those long hours of darkness, "even to the breaking of the day"? No angel sat by his bed to comfort him, nor spirit-voices whispered solace in his ear, nor spirit-sympathy poured balm into the cold, aching, empty heart; but I have my own opinion on such matters, and I would fain believe that struggles and sufferings like these are neither wasted nor forgotten, but are treasured and recorded by kindred beings of a higher nature, as the training that alone fits poor humanity, then noblest, when most sorrowful, to enter the everlasting gates and join the radiant legions of heaven.

CHAPTER XXIII

ANONYMOUS

Lord Bearwarden finds himself very constantly on guard just at present. Her ladyship is of opinion that he earns his pay more thoroughly than any day-labourer his wages. I do not myself consider that helmet, cuirass, and leather breeches form the appropriate appliances of a hero, when terminating in a pair of red morocco slippers. Nevertheless, in all representations purporting to be life-like, effect must be subservient to correctness of detail; and such was the costume in which his lordship, on duty at the Horse Guards, received a dispatch that seemed to cause him considerable surprise and vexation.

The guard coming off was mustering below. The relief coming on was already moving gallantly down Regent Street, to the admiration of all beholders. Armed was his lordship to the teeth, though not to the toes, for his bât-man waited respectfully with a pair of high jack-boots in his hand, and still his officer read, and frowned, and pulled his moustache, and swore, as the saying is, like a trooper, which, if he had only drawn on his boots, would not have been so much out of character at the time.

Once again he read it from end to end ere he crumpled the note in under his cuirass for future consideration. It ran as follows—

"My Lord,

"Your lordship's manly and generous character has obtained for you many well-wishers. Of these the writer

is one of the most sincere. It grieves and angers him to see your lordship's honest nature deceived, your domestic happiness destroyed, your noble confidence abused. The writer, my lord, is your true friend. Though too late for rescue, it is not too late for redress; and he has no power of communicating to your lordship suspicions which now amount to certainty but by the means at present employed. Anonymous letters are usually the resource of a liar and slanderer; but there is no rule without exception; and the writer can bring *proof* of every syllable he asserts. If your lordship will use your own eyes, watch and wait. She has deceived others; why not *you?* Berners Street, Oxford Street, is no crowded thoroughfare. Why should your lordship abstain from walking there any afternoon between four and five? Be wary. Watch and wait."

"Blast his impudence!" muttered Lord Bearwarden, now booted to the thigh, and clattering down-stairs to take command of his guard.

With zealous subalterns, an experienced corporal-major, well-drilled men, and horses that knew their way home, it required little military skill to move his handful of cavalry back to barracks, so Lord Bearwarden came off duty without creating scandal or ridicule in the regiment; but I doubt if he knew exactly what he was doing, till he arrived in plain clothes within a few paces of his own door. Here he paused for a few minutes' reflection before entering his house, and was surprised to see at the street corner a lady extremely like his wife in earnest conversation with a man in rags who had the appearance of a professional beggar. The lady, as far as he could judge at that distance, seemed to be offering money, which the man by his actions obviously refused. Lord Bearwarden walked briskly towards them, a good deal puzzled, and glad to have his attention distracted from his own affairs.

It was a long street, and the couple separated before he reached them, the man disappearing round the corner, while the lady advanced steadily towards himself. When within a few paces she lifted a thick double veil, and he found he had not been mistaken.

Maud was pale and calm as usual, but to those who

knew her well recent agitation would have been betrayed by the lowering of her eyebrows, and an unusual compression of the lines about her mouth.

He knew her better than she thought, and did not fail to remark these signs of a recent storm, but, as usual, refrained from asking for the confidence it was his right to receive.

"You're out early, my lady," said he, in a careless tone. "Been for an appetite against luncheon-time, eh? That beggar just now didn't seem hungry, at any rate. It looked to me as if you were offering him money, and he wouldn't take it. That's quite a new trick in the trade."

She glanced quickly in his face with something almost of reproach. It was a hateful life this, and even now, she thought, if he would question her kindly, she could find it in her heart perhaps to tell him all. All! How she had deceived him, and promised herself to another, and to get rid of that other, only for a time, had rendered herself amenable to the law—had been guilty of actual crime—had sunk to feel the very slave of a felon, the lowest refuse of society. How she, Lady Bearwarden, had within the last ten minutes been threatened by this ruffian, been compelled to submit to his insolence, to make terms with his authority, and to promise him another interview that very afternoon. How every hour of her life was darkened by terror of his presence and dread of his revenge. It was unheard-of! unbearable! She would make a clean breast of it on the first opportunity.

"Let's go in, dear," she said, with more of softness and affection than was her habit when addressing her husband. "Luncheon is almost ready. I'm so glad you got away early from barracks. I see so little of you now. Never mind. It will be all right next week. We shall have two more captains back from leave to help us. You see I'm beginning to know the roster almost as well as the Adjutant himself."

It pleased him that she should show an interest in these professional details. He liked to hear such military terms of the orderly room from those pretty lips, and he would have replied with something unusually affectionate, and therefore exceedingly precious, but that, as husband

and wife reached their own door, they found standing there to greet them the pale wasted face and attenuated figure of Tom Ryfe.

He saluted Lady Bearwarden gravely, but with perfect confidence, and she was obliged to give him her hand, though she felt as if she could have strangled him with pleasure, then and there, by the scraper. Her husband clapped him heartily on the back. "Glad to see you, Tom," said he; "I heard you were ill and called to inquire, but they wouldn't let me disturb you. Been devilish seedy, haven't you? Don't look *quite* in form yet. Come in and have some luncheon. Doctors all tell one to keep up the system now-a-days."

Poor Lady Bearwarden! Here was another of her avengers, risen, as it seemed, from the dead, and she must speak kind words, find false smiles, bid him to her table, and treat him as an honoured guest. Whatever happened, too, she could not endure to leave him alone with Bearwarden. Who could tell what disclosures might come out? She was walking on a mine, so she backed her husband's invitation, and herself led the way into the dining-room where luncheon was ready, not daring even to go up-stairs and take her bonnet off before she sat down.

Mr. Ryfe was less communicative than usual about himself, and spoke as little to her ladyship as seemed compatible with the ordinary forms of politeness. His object was to lull her suspicions and put her off her guard. Nevertheless, with painful attention she watched every glance of his eye, every turn of his features, hanging eagerly, nervously, on every word he said.

Tom had laid his plan of attack, and now called on the lately-married couple, that he might reconnoitre his ground before bringing up his forces. It is not to be supposed that a man of Mr. Ryfe's resources would long remain in ignorance of the real truth, after detecting, as he believed at the time, Lady Bearwarden and Dick Stanmore side by side in a hansom cab.

Ere twenty-four hours had elapsed he had learned the exact state of the case, and had satisfied himself of the extraordinary resemblance between Miss Algernon and the woman he had resolved to persecute without remorse. In

this resemblance he saw an engine with which he hoped to work her ladyship's utter destruction, and then (Tom's heart leapt within him even now at the thought), ruined, lonely, desolate, when the whole world turned from her, she might learn to appreciate his devotion, might take shelter at last with the only heart open to receive her in her shame.

It is hard to say whether Tom's feelings for the woman he so admired were of love or hate.

He saw through Lord Bearwarden's nature thoroughly, for of him, too, he had made it his business to inquire into all the tendencies, all the antecedents. A high fastidious spirit, jealous, because sensitive, yet far too proud to admit, much less indulge that jealousy, seemed of all others the easiest to deceive. The hide of the rhinoceros is no contemptible gift, and a certain bluntness, I might say coarseness of character, enables a man to go through the world comfortably and happily, unvexed by those petty stings and bites and irritations that worry thinner skins to death. With Lord Bearwarden to suspect was to fret and ponder and conceal, hating and despising himself the while. He had other points, besides his taste for soldiering, in common with Othello.

On such a man an anonymous letter acted like a blister, clinging, drawing, inflaming all round the affected part. Nobody in theory so utterly despised these productions. For nobody in practice did they produce so disastrous an effect. And then he had been deceived once before. He had lost his trust, not so much in the other sex (for all men think every woman false but one) as in himself. He had been outraged, hurt, humbled, and the bold confidence, the *dash* with which such games should be played were gone. There is a buoyancy gradually lost as we cross the country of life, which is perhaps worth more than all the gains of experience. And in the real pursuit, as in the mimic hurry of the chase, it is wise to avoid too hazardous a venture. The hunter that has once been overhead in a brook never faces water very heartily again.

Tom could see that his charm was working, that the letter he had written produced all the effect he desired.

His host was obviously preoccupied, absent in manner, and even flurried, at least for *him*. Moreover, he drank brown sherry out of a claret-glass, which looked like being uncomfortable somewhere inside. Lady Bearwarden, grave and unusually silent, watched her husband with a sad, wistful air, that goaded Tom to madness. How he had loved that pale, proud face, and it was paler and prouder and lovelier than ever to-day!

"I've seen some furniture you'd like to look at, my lord," said Tom, in his old, underbred manner. "There's a chair I'd buy directly if I'd a house to put it in, or a lady to sit on it; and a carved ebony frame it's worth going all the distance to see. If you'd nothing to do this afternoon, I'll be proud to show them you. Twenty minutes' drive from here in a hansom."

"Will you come?" asked Lord Bearwarden, kindly, of his wife. "You might take us in the barouche."

She seemed strangely agitated by so natural a proposal, and neither gentleman failed to remark her disorder.

"I shall like it very much," she stammered. "At least I should. But I can't this afternoon. I—I've got an engagement at the other end of the town."

"Which *is* the other end of the town?" said Lord Bearwarden, laughing. "You've not told us *your* end yet, Tom;" but seeing his wife's colour fade more and more, he purposely filled Tom's glass to distract his attention.

Her engagement was indeed of no pleasant nature. It was to hold another interview with "Gentleman Jim," in which she hoped to prevail on him to leave the country by offering the largest sum of money she could raise from all her resources. Once released from his persecutions, she thought she could breathe a little, and face Tom Ryfe well enough single-handed, should he try to poison her husband's mind against her—an attempt she thought him likely enough to make. It was Jim she feared—Jim, whom drink and crime, and an infatuation of which she was herself the cause, had driven almost mad—she could see it in his eye—who was reckless of her character as of his own—who insisted on her giving him these meetings two or three times a week, and was capable of any folly,

any outrage, if she disappointed him. Well, to-day should end it! On that she was determined. If he persisted in refusing her bribe, she would throw herself on Lord Bearwarden's mercy and tell him the whole truth.

Maud had more self-command than most women, and could hold her own even in so false a position as this.

"I must get another gown," she said, after a moment's pause, ignoring Tom's presence altogether as she addressed her husband across the table. "I've nothing to wear at the Den, if it's cold when we go down next week, so I *must* call at Stripe and Rainbow's to-day, and I won't keep you waiting in the carriage all the time I'm shopping."

He seemed quite satisfied. "Then I'll take Ryfe to my sulking-room," said he, "and wish you good-bye till dinner-time. Tom, you shall have the best cigar in England—I've kept them five years, and they're strong enough to blow your head off now."

So Tom, with a formal bow to Lady Bearwarden, followed his host into a snug but dark apartment at the back, devoted, as was at once detected by its smell, to the consumption of tobacco.

While he lit a cigar, he could not help thinking of the days, not so long ago, when Maud would have followed him, at least with her eyes, out of the room, but consoled himself by the reflection that his turn was coming now, and so smoked quietly on with a firm, cruel determination to do his worst.

Thus it came to pass that, before they had finished their cigars, these gentlemen heard the roll of her ladyship's carriage as it took her away; also that a few minutes later, passing Stripe and Rainbow's in a hansom cab, they saw the same carriage, standing empty at the door of that gorgeous and magnificent emporium.

"Don't get out, Tom," said his lordship, stopping the hansom, "I only want to ask a question—I sha'n't be a minute;" and in two strides he was across the pavement and within the folding-doors of the shop.

Perhaps the question he meant to ask was of his own common-sense, and its answer seemed hard to accept philosophically. Perhaps he never expected to find what

he meant to look for, yet was weak enough to feel disappointed all the same—for he had turned very pale when he re-entered the cab, and he lit another cigar without speaking.

Though her carriage stood at the door, he had searched the whole of Stripe and Rainbow's shop for Lady Bearwarden in vain.

Tom Ryfe was not without a certain mother-wit sharpened by his professional education. He suspected the truth, recalling the agitated manner of his hostess at luncheon, when her afternoon's employment came under notice. Will it be believed that he experienced an actual pang, to think she should have some assignation, some secret of which his lordship must be kept in ignorance—that he should have felt more jealous of this unknown, this possible rival, than of her lawful husband now sitting by his side! He was no bad engineer, however, and having laid his train, waited patiently for the mine to explode at its proper time.

"What an outlandish part of the town we are getting to," observed Lord Bearwarden, after several minutes' silence; "your furniture-man seems to live at the other end of the world."

"If you want to buy things at first hand you must go into Oxford Street," answered Tom. "Let's get out and walk, my lord; it's so crowded here, we shall make better way."

So they paid their hansom, and threading the swarms of passengers on the footway, turned into Berners Street arm-in-arm.

Tom walked very slowly for reasons of his own, but made himself pleasant enough, talking on a variety of subjects, and boasting his own good taste in matters of curiosity, especially old furniture.

"I wish you could have induced the viscountess to come with us," said Tom, "we should have been all the better for her help. But ladies have so many engagements in the afternoon we know nothing about, that it's impossible to secure their company without several days' notice. I'll be bound her ladyship is in Stripe and Rainbow's still."

There was something in the casual remark that jarred on Lord Bearwarden, more than Tom's absurd habit of thus bestowing her full title on his wife in common conversation, though even that provoked him a little too; something to set him thinking, to rouse all the pride and all the suspicion of his nature. "The viscountess," as Tom called her, was *not* in Stripe and Rainbow's, of that he had made himself perfectly certain less than half-an-hour ago; then where *could* she be? Why this secrecy, this mystery, this reserve, that had been growing up between them day by day ever since their marriage? What conclusion was a man likely to arrive at who had lived in the world of London from boyhood, and been already once so cruelly deceived? His blood boiled; and Tom, whose hand rested on his arm, felt the muscles swell and quiver beneath his touch.

Mr. Ryfe had timed his observation well; the two gentlemen were now proceeding slowly up Berners Street, and had arrived nearly opposite the house that contained Simon's painting-room, its hard-working artist, its frequent visitor, its beautiful sitter, and its Fairy Queen. Since his first visit there Tom Ryfe, in person or through his emissaries, had watched the place strictly enough to have become familiar with the habits of its inmates.

Mr. Stanmore's trial trip with Miss Algernon proved so satisfactory, that the journey had been repeated on the same terms every day: this arrangement, very gratifying to the persons involved, originated indeed with Simon, who now went regularly after work to pass a few hours with his sick friend. Thus, to see these two young people bowling down Berners Street in a hansom cab, about five o'clock, looking supremely happy the while, was as good a certainty as to meet the local pot-boy, or the postman.

Tom Ryfe manœuvred skilfully enough to bring his man on the ground precisely at the right moment.

Still harping on old furniture, he was in the act of remarking that "he should know the shop again, though he had forgotten the number, and that it must be a few doors higher up," when his companion started, uttered a tremendous execration, and struggling to free himself

from Tom's arm, holloaed at an unconscious cab-driver to stop.

"What's the matter? are you ill, my lord?" exclaimed his companion, holding on to him with all his weight, while affecting great anxiety and alarm.

"D——n you! let me go!" exclaimed Lord Bearwarden, nearly flinging Tom to the pavement as he shook himself free and tore wildly down the street in vain pursuit.

He returned in a minute or two, white, scared, and breathless. Pulling his moustache fiercely, he made a gallant effort to compose himself; but when he spoke, his voice was so changed, Tom looked with surprise in his face.

"You saw it too, Tom!" he said at last, in a hoarse whisper.

"Saw it!—saw what?" repeated Tom, with an admirable assumption of ignorance, innocence, and dismay.

"Saw Lady Bearwarden in that cab with Dick Stanmore!" answered his lordship, steadying himself bravely like a good ship in a breeze, and growing cooler and cooler, as was his nature in an emergency.

"Are you sure of it?—did you see her face? I fancied so myself, but thought I must be mistaken. It was Mr. Stanmore, no doubt, but it cannot possibly have been the viscountess."

Tom spoke with an air of gravity, reflection, and profound concern.

"I may settle with *him*, at any rate!" said Lord Bearwarden. "Tom, you're a true friend; I can trust you like myself. It's a comfort to have a friend, Tom, when a fellow's smashed up like this. I shall bear it well enough presently; but it's an awful facer, old boy. I'd have done anything for that woman—I tell you, anything! I'd have cut off my right hand to please her. And now! —It's not because she doesn't care for me—I've known that all along; but to think that she's like—like those poor painted devils we met just now. Like them!—she's a million times worse! O, it's hard to bear! Damnation! I *won't* bear it! Somebody will have to give an account for this!"

"You have my sympathy," said Tom, in a low respectful voice, for he knew his man thoroughly; "these things won't stand talking about; but you shall have my assistance too, in any and every way you require. I'm not a swell, my lord, but I'll stick by you through thick and thin."

The other pressed his arm. "We must do something at once," said he. "I will go up to barracks now: call for me there in an hour's time; I shall have decided on everything by then."

So Lord Bearwarden carried a sore heart back once more to the old familiar scenes—through the well-known gate, past the stalwart sentry, amongst all the sights and sounds of the profession by which he set such store. What a mockery it seemed!—how hard, how cruel, and how unjust!

But this time at least, he felt, he should not be obliged to sit down and brood over his injuries without reprisals or redress.

CHAPTER XXIV

PARTED

Lady Bearwarden's carriage had, without doubt, set her down at Stripe and Rainbow's, to take her up again at the same place after waiting there for so long a period as must have impressed on her servants the importance of their lady's toilet, and the careful study she bestowed on its selection. The tall bay horses had been flicked at least a hundred times to make them stand out and show themselves, in the form London coachmen think so imposing to passers-by. The footman had yawned as often, expressing with each contortion an excessive longing for beer. Many street boys had lavished their criticisms, favourable and otherwise, on the wheels, the panels, the varnish, the driver's wig, and that dignitary's legs, whom they had the presumption to address as "John." Diverse connoisseurs on the pavement had appraised the bay horses at every conceivable price—some men never can pass a horse or a woman without thinking whether they would like to bargain for the one or make love to the other; and the animals themselves seemed to have interchanged many confidential whispers, on the subject, probably, of beans, —when Lady Bearwarden re-appeared, to seat herself in the carriage and give the welcome order, "Home!"

She had passed what the French call a very "bad little quarter of an hour," and the storm had left its trace on her pale brow and delicate features. They bore, nevertheless, that firm, resolute expression which Maud must have inherited from some iron-hearted ancestor. There was the

same stern clash of the jaw, the same hard, determined frown in this, their lovely descendant, that confronted Plantagenet and his mailed legions on the plains by Stirling, that stiffened under the wan moonlight on Culloden Moor amongst broken claymores and riven targets, and tartans all stained to the deep-red hues of the Stuart with his clansmen's blood.

Softened, weakened by a tender, doubting affection, she had yielded to an ignoble, unworthy coercion; but it had been put on too hard of late, and her natural character asserted itself under the pressure. She was in that mood which makes the martyr and the heroine, sometimes even the criminal, but on which, deaf to reason and insensible to fear, threats and arguments are equally thrown away.

She had met "Gentleman Jim," according to promise, extorted from her by menaces of everything that could most outrage her womanly feelings and tarnish her fair fame before the world—had met him with as much secrecy, duplicity, and caution as though he were really the favoured lover for whom she was prepared to sacrifice home, husband, honour, and all. The housebreaker had mounted a fresh disguise for the occasion, and flattered himself, to use his own expression, that he looked "quite the gentleman from top to toe." Could he have known how this high-bred woman loathed his tawdry ornaments, his flash attire, his silks and velvets, and flushed face, and dirty, ringed hands and greasy hair!

Could he have known! He *did* know, and it maddened him till he forgot reason, prudence, experience, common-sense—forgot everything but the present torture, the cruel longing for the impossible, the accursed conviction (worse than all the stings of drink and sin and remorse) that this one wild, hopeless desire of his existence could never be attained.

Therefore, in the lonely street to which a cab had brought her from the shop where her carriage waited, and which they paced to and fro, this strangely-assorted pair, he gave vent to his feelings, and broke out in a paroxysm that roused all his listener's feelings of anger, resistance, and disgust. She had just offered him so large a sum of money to quit England for ever, as even Jim, for whom,

you must remember, every sovereign represented twenty shillings' worth of beer, could not refuse without a qualm. He hesitated, and Maud's face brightened with a ray of hope that quivered in her eyes like sunlight. "To sail next week," said he slowly; "to take my last look of ye to-day. Them's the articles. My last look. Standing there in the daylight—a *real* lady! And never to come back no more!"

She clasped her hands—the delicate gloved hands, with their heavy bracelets at the wrists—and her voice shook while she spoke. "You'll go; won't you? It will make your fortune; and—and—I'll always think of you kindly—and—gratefully. I *will* indeed; so long as you keep away."

He sprang like a horse to the lash. "It's h—ll!" he exclaimed. "Put back your cursed money. I won't do it!"

"You won't do it?"

There was such quiet despair in her accents as drove him to fury.

"I won't do it!" he repeated in a low voice that frightened her. "I'll rot in a gaol first!—I'll swing on a gallows!—I'll die in a ditch! Take care as *you* don't give me something to swing for! Yes, *you*, with your pale face, and your high-handed ways, and your cold, cruel heart that can send a poor devil to the other end o' the earth with a 'pleasant trip, and here's your health, my lad,' like as if I was goin' across to Lambeth. And yet you stand there as beautiful as a hangel; and I—I'm a fool, I am! And—and I don't know what keeps me from slippin' my knife into that white throat o' yourn, except it is as you don't look not a morsel dashed, nor skeared, you don't; no more than you was that first night as ever I see your face. And I wish my eyes had been lime-blinded first, and I'd been dead and rotting in my grave."

With anything like a contest, as usual, Maud's courage came back.

"I am not in your power yet," said she, raising her haughty head. "There stands the cab. When we reach it I get in, and you shall never have a chance of speaking to me after to-day. Once for all. Will you take this

money, or leave it? I shall not make the offer again."

He took the notes from her hand, with a horrible oath, and dashed them on the ground; then growing so pale she thought he must have fallen, seemed to recover his temper and his presence of mind, picked them up, returned them very quietly, and stood aside on the narrow pavement to let her pass.

"You are right," said he, in a voice so changed, she looked anxiously in his white face, working like that of a man in a fit. "I was a fool a while ago. I know better now. But I won't take the notes, my lady. Thank ye kindly just the same. I'll wish ye good-mornin' now. O, no! Make yourself easy. I'll never ask to see ye again."

He staggered while he walked away, and laid hold of an area railing as he turned the street corner; but Maud was too glad to get rid of her tormentor at any price to speculate on his meaning, his movements, or the storm that raged within his breast.

And now, sitting back in her carriage, bowling homeward, with the fresh evening breeze in her face, the few men left to take their hats off looked in that face, and while making up their minds that after all it was the handsomest in London, felt instinctively they had never coveted the ownership of its haughty beauty so little as to-day. Her husband's cornet, walking with a brother subaltern, and saluting Lady Bearwarden, or, rather, the carriage and horses, for her ladyship's eyes and thoughts were miles away, expressed the popular feeling perhaps with sufficient clearness when he thus delivered himself, in reply to his companion's loudly-expressed admiration—

"The best-looking woman in London, no doubt, and the best turned out. But I think Bruin's got a handful, you know. Tell ye what, my boy, I'm generally right about women. She looks like the sort that, if they once *begin* to kick, never leave off till they've knocked the splinter-bar into toothpicks and carried away the whole of the front boot."

Maud, all unconscious of the light in which she appeared to this young philosopher, was meanwhile hardening her

heart with considerable misgivings for the task she had in view, resolved that nothing should now deter her from the confession she had delayed too long. She reflected how foolish it was not to have taken advantage of the first confidences of married life by throwing herself on her husband's mercy, telling him all the folly, imprudence, crime of which she had been guilty, and imploring to be forgiven. Every day that passed made it more difficult, particularly since this coolness had arisen between them, which, although she felt it did not originate with herself, she also felt a little pliancy on her part, a little warmth of manner, a little expressed affection, would have done much to counteract and put away. She had delayed it too long; but "Better late than never." It should be done to-day; before she dressed for dinner; the instant she got home. She would put her arms round his neck, and tell him that the worst of her iniquities, the most unpardonable, had been committed for love of *him!* She could not bear to lose him (Maud forgot that in those days it was the coronet she wanted to capture). She dreaded falling in his esteem. She dared all, risked all, because without him life must have been to *her*, as it is to so many, a blank and a mistake. But supposing he put on the cold, grave face, assumed the conventional tone she knew so well, told her he could not pardon such unladylike, such unwomanly proceedings, or that he did not desire to intrude on confidences so long withheld; or, worse than all, that they did very well as they were, got on—he had hinted as much once before—better than half the married couples in London, why, she must bear it. This would be part of the punishment; and at least she could have the satisfaction of assuring him how she loved him, and of loving him heartily, humbly, even without return.

Lady Bearwarden had never done anything humbly before. Perhaps she thought this new sensation might be for her good—might make her a changed woman, and in such change happier henceforth.

Tears sprang to her eyes. How slow that man drove; but, thank heaven! here she was, home at last.

On the hall-table lay a letter in her husband's handwriting, addressed to herself. "How provoking!" she

muttered, "to say he dines out, of course. And now I must wait till to-morrow. Never mind."

Passing up-stairs to her boudoir, she opened it as she entered the room, and sank into a chair, with a faint passionate cry, like that of a hare, or other weak animal, struck to the death. She had courage, nevertheless, to read it over twice, so as thoroughly to master the contents. During their engagement they used to meet every day. They had not been parted since their marriage. It was the first, literally the very first, letter she had ever received from him.

"I have no reproaches to make," it said, "nor reasons to offer for my own decision. I leave both to your sense of right, if indeed yours can be the same as that usually accepted amongst honourable people. I have long felt some mysterious barrier existed between you and me. I have only an hour ago discovered its disgraceful nature, and the impossibility that it can ever be removed. You cannot wonder at my not returning home. Stay there as long as you please, and be assured I shall not enter that house again. You will not probably wish to see or hold any communication with me in future, but should you be so ill-advised as to attempt it, remember I have taken care to render it impossible. I know not how I have forfeited the right to be treated fairly and on the square, nor why *you*, of all the world, should have felt entitled to make me your dupe, but this is a question on which I do not mean to enter, now nor hereafter. My man of business will attend to any directions you think proper to give, and has my express injunctions to further your convenience in every way, but to withhold my address and all information respecting my movements. With a sincere wish for your welfare, I remain,

"Yours, etc.,

"BEARWARDEN."

She was stunned, stupefied, bewildered. What had he found out? What could it mean? She had known of late she loved him very dearly; she never knew till now the pain such love might bring. She rocked herself to

and fro in her agony, but soon started up into action. She must do *something*. She could not sit there under his very picture looking down on her, manly, and kind, and soldierlike. She ran down-stairs to his room. It was all disordered just as he had left it, and an odour of tobacco clung heavily round the curtains and furniture. She wondered now she should ever have disliked the fumes of that unsavoury plant. She could not bear to stay there long, but hurried up-stairs again to ring for a servant, and bid him get a cab at once, to see if Lord Bearwarden was at the barracks. She felt hopelessly convinced it was no use; even if he were, nothing would be gained by the assurance, but it seemed a relief to obtain an interval of waiting and uncertainty and delay. When the man returned to report that "his lordship had been there and gone away again," she wished she had let it alone. It formed no light portion of her burden that she must preserve an appearance of composure before her servants. It seemed such a mockery while her heart was breaking, yes, breaking, in the desolation of her sorrow, the blank of a future without *him*.

Then in extremity of need she bethought her of Dick Stanmore, and in this I think Lady Bearwarden betrayed, under all her energy and force of character, the softer elements of woman's nature. A man, I suppose, under any pressure of affliction would hardly go for consolation to the woman he had deceived. He partakes more of the wild beast's sullenness, which, sick or wounded, retires to mope in a corner by itself; whereas a woman, as indeed seems only becoming to her less firmly-moulded character, shows in a struggle all the qualities of valour except that one additional atom of final endurance which wins the fight at last. In real bitter distress they must have some one to lean on. Is it selfishness that bids them carry their sorrows for help to the very hearts they have crushed and trampled? Is it not rather a noble instinct of forgiveness and generosity which tells them that if their mutual cases were reversed they would themselves be capable of affording the sympathy they expect?

Maud knew that, to use the conventional language of the world in which they moved, "she had treated Dick

ill." We think very lightly of these little social outrages in the battle of life, and yet I doubt if one human being can inflict a much deeper injury on another than that which deprives the victim of all power of enjoyment, all belief in good, all hope for the future, all tender memories of the past. Man or woman, we ought to have some humane compunction, some little hesitation in sitting down to play at that game from which the winner rises only wearied with unmerited good fortune, the loser, haggard, miserable, stripped and beggared for life.

It was owing to no forbearance of Lady Bearwarden's that Dick had so far recovered his losses as to sit down once more and tempt fortune at another table; but she turned to him nevertheless in this her hour of perplexity, and wrote to ask his aid, advice, and sympathy in her great distress.

I give her letter, though it never reached its destination, because I think it illustrates certain feminine ideas of honour, justice, and plain dealing which must originate in some code of reasoning totally unintelligible to ourselves.

"Dear Mr. Stanmore,

"You are a true friend, I feel sure. I have always considered you, since we have been acquainted, the truest and most tried amongst the few I possess. You told me once, some time ago, when we used to meet oftener than we have of late, that if ever I was in sorrow or difficulty I was to be sure and let you know. I am in sorrow and difficulty now—great sorrow, overwhelming difficulty. I have nobody that cares for me enough to give advice or help, and I am so very, *very* sad and desolate. I think I have some claim upon you. We used to be so much together and were always such good friends. Besides, we are almost relations, are we not? and once I thought we should have been something more. But that is all over now.

"Will you help me? Come to me at once, or write. Lord Bearwarden has left me without a word of explanation except a cruel, cutting, formal letter that I cannot understand. I don't know what I have said or done, but

it seems so hard, so inhuman. And I loved him very dearly, very. Indeed, though you have every right to say you don't believe me, I would have made him a good wife if he had let me. My heart seems quite crushed and broken. It is too hard. Again I ask you to help me, and remain always

"Yours sincerely,
"M. BEARWARDEN."

There is little doubt that had Dick Stanmore ever received this touching production he would have lost not one moment in complying with the urgency of its appeal. But Dick did not receive it, for the simple reason that, although stamped by her ladyship and placed in the letter-box, it was never sent to the post.

Lord Bearwarden, though absenting himself from home under such unpleasant circumstances, could not therefore shake off the thousand imperceptible meshes that bind a man like chains of iron to his own domestic establishment. Amongst other petty details his correspondence had to be provided for, and he sent directions accordingly to his groom of the chambers, that all his letters should be forwarded to a certain address. The groom of the chambers, who had served in one or two families before, of which the heads had separated under rather discreditable circumstances, misunderstanding his master's orders, or determined to err on the safe side, forwarded all the letters he could lay hands on to my lord. Therefore the hurt and angry husband was greeted, ere he had left home a day, by the sight of an envelope in his wife's handwriting addressed to the man with whom he believed she was in love. Even under such provocation Lord Bearwarden was too high-minded to open the enclosure, but sent it back forthwith in a slip of paper, on which he calmly "presented his compliments and begged to forward a letter he could see was Lady Bearwarden's that had fallen into his hands by mistake."

Maud, weeping in her desolate home, tore it into a thousand shreds. There was something characteristic of her husband in these little honourable scruples that cut her to the heart.

"Why didn't he read it?" she repeated, wringing her hands and walking up and down the room. "He knows Mr. Stanmore quite well. Why didn't he read it? and then he would have seen what I shall never, never be able to tell him now!"

CHAPTER XXV

COAXING A FIGHT

Mr. Ryfe could now congratulate himself that his puppets were fairly on the stage prepared for their several parts; and it remained but to bring them into play, and with that view, he summoned all the craft of his experience to assist the cunning of his nature.

Lord Bearwarden, amongst other old-fashioned prejudices, clung to an obsolete notion that there are certain injuries, and those of the deepest and most abiding, for which neither the opinion of society, nor the laws of the land, afford redress, and which can only be wiped out by personal encounter of man to man. It seemed to him that he could more easily forget his sorrow, and turn with a firmer tread into the beaten track of life, after a snap shot at Mr. Stanmore across a dozen yards of turf. Do not blame him—remember his education and the opinions of those amongst whom he lived. Remember, too, that his crowning sorrow had not yet taught him resignation, an opiate which works only with lapse of time. There is a manlier and a truer courage than that which seeks a momentary oblivion of its wrongs in the excitement of personal danger—there is a heroism of defence, far above the easier valour of attack—and those are distinguished as the bravest troops that under severe loss preserve their discipline and formation, without returning the fire of an enemy.

Lord Bearwarden, however, as became the arm of the service to which he belonged, was impatient of inaction,

and had not yet learned to look on hostilities in this light.

"We'll parade him, Tom," said he, affecting a cheerfulness which did not the least deceive his companion. "I don't want to make a row about it, of course. I'll spare *her*, though she hardly deserves it, but I'll have a slap at *him*, and I'll shoot him, too, if I can! You needn't put us up much farther than the width of this room!"

They were closeted together at the back of a certain unassuming hotel, where their addresses, if required, would be consistently denied. The room in question was small, gloomy, and uncomfortable, but so shaded and sequestered, that, lulled by its drowsy glimmer, for its inmates, as for the lotus-eaters, "it was always afternoon."

"Suppose he won't fight," observed Tom, shaking his head.

"Won't fight!" repeated his lordship, in high disdain. "Curse him—he *must* fight. I'll horsewhip him in the Park! That's all nonsense, Tom. The fellow's a gentleman. I'll say that for him. He'll see the propriety of keeping the whole thing quiet, if it was only out of regard for *her*. You must settle it, Tom. It's a great deal to ask. I know I ought to have gone to a brother-officer, but this is a peculiar case, you see, and the fewer fellows in the hunt the better!"

Mr. Ryfe mused. He didn't much like his job, but reflected that, under the management of any one else, an explanation would assuredly put everything in its true light, and his web would all be brushed away. What he required was a scandal; a slander so well sustained, that Lady Bearwarden's character should never recover it, and for such a purpose nothing seemed so efficacious as a duel, of which she should be the cause. He imagined also, in his inexperience, like the immortal Mr. Winkle, that these encounters were usually bloodless, and mere matters of form.

"You're resolved, I suppose," said Tom. "I needn't point out to you, my lord, that such a course shuts every door to reconciliation—precludes every possibility of things coming right in future. It's a strong measure

—a very strong measure—and you really mean to carry it through?"

"I've made up my mind to shoot him," answered the other doggedly. "What's the use of jawing about it? These things should be done at once, my good fellow. If we have to go abroad, we'll start to-morrow night."

"I'd better try and hunt him up without delay," said Tom. "It's easier to find a fellow now than in the middle of the season, but I might not hit upon him to-night, nevertheless."

Lord Bearwarden looked at his watch. "Try his club," said he. "If he dines there, it's about the time. They'll know his address at any rate, and if you look sharp you might catch him at home dressing for dinner. I'll wait here and we'll have a mutton-chop when you come in. Stick to him, Tom. Don't let him back out. It would have saved a deal of trouble," added his lordship, while the other hurried off, "if I could have caught that cab to-day. She'd have been frightened, though, and upset. Better as it is, perhaps, after all."

Mr. Ryfe did not suffer the wheels of his chariot to tarry, nor the grass to grow beneath his feet. Very few minutes elapsed before he found himself waiting in the strangers' room of a club much affected by Dick Stanmore, comforted with a hall-porter's assurance that the gentleman he sought had ordered dinner, and could not fail to arrive almost immediately. He had scarcely taken up the evening paper when Mr. Stanmore came in.

Anything less like a conscience-stricken Lothario, burdened with the guilt of another man's wife, can scarcely be imagined. Dick's eye was bright, his cheek blooming, his countenance radiant with health, happiness, and the light from within that is kindled by a good conscience and a loving heart. He came up to Ryfe with a merry greeting on his lips, but stopped short, marking the gravity of that gentleman's face and the unusual formality of his bow.

"My errand is a very painful one," said Tom. "I regret to say, Mr. Stanmore, that I have come to you on a most unpleasant business."

"I thought you'd come to dinner," answered Dick, no

whit disconcerted. "Never mind. Let's have it out. I dare say it's not half so bad as it seems."

"It could not possibly be worse," was the solemn rejoinder. "It involves life and honour for two gentlemen, both of whom I respect and esteem. For the sake of one, a very dear friend, I have consented to be here now. Mr. Stanmore, I come to you on behalf of Lord Bearwarden."

Dick started. The old wound was healed, and, indeed, perfectly cured now, but the skin had not yet grown quite callous over that injured part.

"Go on," said he. "Why didn't Lord Bearwarden come himself?"

"Impossible!" answered Tom, with great dignity. "Contrary to all precedent. I could not have permitted such a thing. Should not have listened to it for a moment. Quite inadmissible. Would have placed every one in a false position. His lordship has lost no time in selecting an experienced friend. May I hope Mr. Stanmore will be equally prompt? You understand me, of course."

"I'm hanged if I *do!*" replied Dick, opening his eyes very wide. "You must speak plainer. What is it all about?"

"Simply," said the other, "that my principal assures me he feels confident your own sense of honour will not permit you to refuse him a meeting. Lord Bearwarden, as you must be aware, Mr. Stanmore, is a man of very high spirit and peculiarly sensitive feelings. You have inflicted on him some injury of so delicate a nature that even from me, his intimate friend, he withholds his confidence on the real facts of the case. He leads me to believe that I shall not find my task very difficult, and my own knowledge of Mr. Stanmore's high character and jealous sense of honour points to the same conclusion. You will, of course, meet me half-way, without any further negotiation or delay."

("If he's ever spoken three words of endearment to 'the viscountess,'" reflected Tom, "he'll understand at once. If he hasn't, he'll think I'm mad!")

"But I can't fight without I'm told what it's for," urged Dick, in considerable bewilderment. "I don't know Lord

Bearwarden well. I've nothing to do with him. We've never had a quarrel in our lives."

"Mr. Stanmore!" replied the other. "You surprise me. I thought you quite a different sort of person. I thought a *gentleman*"—here a flash in Dick's eye warned him not to go too far—"a gentleman of your intelligence would have anticipated my meaning without trying to force from me an explanation, which indeed it is out of my power to make. There *are* injuries, Mr. Stanmore, on which outraged friendship cannot bear to enlarge; for which a man of honour feels bound to offer the only reparation in his power. Must we *force* you, Mr. Stanmore, into the position we require, by overt measures, as disgraceful to you as they would be unbecoming in my friend?"

"Stop a moment, Mr. Ryfe," said Dick. "Do you speak now for yourself or Lord Bearwarden?"

There was a slight contraction of the lip accompanying this remark that Tom by no means fancied. He hastened to shelter himself behind his principal.

"For Lord Bearwarden, decidedly," said he, "and without intention of the slightest discourtesy. My only object is indeed to avoid, for both parties, anything so revolting as a personal collision. Have I said enough?"

"No, you haven't!" answered Dick, who was getting warm while his dinner was getting cold. "If you won't tell me what the offence is, how can I offer either redress or apology?"

"No apology would be accepted," replied Mr. Ryfe loftily. "Nor, indeed, does his lordship consider that his injuries admit of extenuation. Shall I tell you his very words, Mr. Stanmore, addressed to me less than an hour ago?"

"Drive on," said Dick.

"His lordship's words, not my own, you will bear in mind," continued Tom, rather uncomfortable, but resolved to play out his trump card. "And I only repeat them as it were in confidence, and at your own request. 'Tom,' said he, 'nothing on earth shall prevent our meeting. No. Not if I have to horsewhip Mr. Stanmore in the Park to bring it about.'"

"If that don't fetch him," thought Tom, "he's not the man I take him for."

It *did* fetch him. Dick started, and turned fiercely on the speaker.

"The devil!" he exclaimed. "Two can play at that game, and perhaps he might come off the worst! Mr. Ryfe, you're a bold man to bring such a message to *me*. I'm not sure how far your character of ambassador should bear you harmless; but, in the meantime, tell your principal I'll accommodate him with pleasure, and the sooner the better."

Dick's blood was up, as indeed seemed natural enough under so gross an insult, and he was all for fighting now, right or wrong. Tom Ryfe congratulated himself on the success of this, his first step in a diplomacy leading to war, devoutly hoping that the friend to whom Mr. Stanmore should refer him might prove equally fierce and hot-headed. He bowed with the studied courtesy assumed by every man concerned, either as principal or second, in an act of premeditated homicide, and smoothed his hat preparatory to taking leave.

"If you will kindly favour me with your friend's name," said he in a tone of excessive suavity, "I will wish you good-evening. I fear I have already kept you too long from dinner."

Dick considered for a few seconds, while he ran over in his mind the sum-total of intimates on whom he could rely in an emergency like the present. It is wonderful how short such lists are. Mr. Stanmore could not recall more than half-a-dozen, and of these four were out of town, and one lay ill in bed. The only available man of the six was Simon Perkins. Dick Stanmore knew that he could trust him to act as a stanch friend through thick and thin, but he had considerable scruples in availing himself of the painter's assistance under existing circumstances.

Time pressed, however, and there was nothing for it but to furnish Mr. Ryfe with Simon's name and address in Berners Street.

"Can I see him at once?" asked Tom, strangely anxious to hasten matters, as it seemed to Dick Stanmore, who

could not help wondering whether, had the visitor been a combatant, he would have proved equally eager for the fray.

"I am afraid not till to-morrow," was the reply. "He has left his painting-room by this time and gone out of town. I cannot ask you to take another journey to-night. Allow me to offer you a glass of sherry before you go."

Tom declined the proffered hospitality, bowing himself out, as befitted the occasion, with much ceremonious politeness, and leaving the other to proceed to his club-dinner in a frame of mind that considerably modified the healthy appetite he had brought with him half-an-hour ago.

He congratulated himself, however, before his soup was done, that he had not sent Mr. Ryfe down to the cottage at Putney. He could not bear to think of that peaceful, happy retreat, the nest of his dove, the home of his heart, as desecrated by such a presence on such an errand. "Come what might," he thought, "Nina must be kept from all terrors and anxieties of this kind—all knowledge of such wild, wicked doings as these."

So thinking, and reflecting, also, that it was very possible with an encounter of so deadly a nature before him they might never meet again, he knew too well by the heaviness at his heart how dear this girl had become in so short a time—how completely she had filled up that gaping wound in his affections from which he once thought he must have bled hopelessly to death; how entirely he was bound up in her happiness, and how, even in an hour of trouble, danger, and vexation like this, his chief anxiety was lest it should bring sorrow and suffering to *her*.

He drank but little wine at his solitary dinner, smoked one cigar after it, and wrote a long letter to Nina before he went to bed—a letter in which he told her all his love, all the comfort she had been to him, all his past sorrows, all his future hopes, and then tore this affectionate production into shreds and flung it in the fire-place. It had only been meant to reach her hands if he should be killed. And was it not calculated, then, to render her more unhappy, more inconsolable? He asked himself the question several times before he found resolution to answer it in the

practical manner described. I think he must have been very fond of Nina Algernon indeed, although he did not the least know she was at that moment looking out of window, with her hair down, listening to the night breeze in the poplars, the lap and wash of the ebb-tide against the river-banks, thinking how nice it was to have met him that morning, by the merest accident, how nice it would be to see him in the painting-room, by the merest accident again, of course, to-morrow afternoon.

The clock at St. George's, Hanover Square, struck nine as Mr. Ryfe returned to his hotel. He found Lord Bearwarden waiting for him, and dinner ready to be placed on the table.

"Have you settled it?" asked his lordship, in a fierce whisper that betrayed no little eagerness for action—something very like a thirst for blood. "When is it for, Tom? To-morrow morning? I've got everything ready. I don't know that we need cross the water, after all."

"Easy, my lord," answered Tom. "I can't get on quite so quick as you wish. I've seen our man, and learned his friend's name and address. That's pretty well, I think, for one day's work."

"You'll meet the friend to-night, Tom!" exclaimed the other. "Who is he? Do we know him? He's a soldier, I hope?"

"He's a painter, and he lives out of town; so I *can't* see him till to-morrow. In the meantime, I would venture to suggest, my lord, that I'm recovering from a severe illness, and I've been eight hours without food."

Tom spoke cheerily enough, but in good truth he looked haggard and out-worn. Lord Bearwarden rang the bell.

"I'm ashamed of myself," said he. "Let's have dinner directly; and as for this cursed business, don't let us think any more about it till to-morrow morning."

They sat down accordingly to good food, well cooked, good wine, well decanted: in good society, too, well chosen from a select fraternity usually to be found in this secluded resort. So they feasted, and were merry, talking of hounds, horses, hunting, racing, weight for age, wine, women, and what not. The keenest observer, the acutest judge of his kind, could never have detected that one of these men

was meditating bloodshed, the other prompting him to something very like murder as an accessory before the fact.

I will never believe that Damocles ate his supper with less appetite, drank his wine with less zest, for the threatening sword suspended overhead.

CHAPTER XXVI

BAFFLED

Mr. Ryfe, we may be sure, did not fail to make his appearance in Berners Street at an early hour on the following day, as soon indeed as, according to Mr. Stanmore's information, there was any chance of finding the painter at home. He felt, and he told himself so more than once, that he was enacting the part of Mephistopheles, without the supernatural power of that fatal auxiliary, without even a fair allowance of time to lure his Faust to perdition. He had undertaken a task that never would have occurred but to a desperate man, and Tom was desperate, inasmuch as the one hope on which he set his heart had crumbled to atoms. He had resolved to bring together in active hostility two men of the world, versed in the usages of society, themselves perfectly familiar with the code of social honour, that they might attempt each other's lives beguiled by a delusion gross and palpable as the common tricks of any fire-eating conjurer at a fair.

The very audacity of the scheme, however, seemed to afford its best chance of success, and when that success should have been attained, Tom's fancy, overleaping all intermediate difficulties, revelled in the wild possibilities of the future. Of bloodshed he took very little thought. What cared he, with his sad, sore heart, for the lives of those prosperous men, gifted with social advantages that had been denied to himself, and that he felt a proud consciousness he could have put to a far richer profit? Whether either or both were killed, whether either or both

came home untouched, his object would equally be gained. Lady Bearwarden's fair fame would equally be dishonoured before the world. He knew that world well, knew its tyrannical code, its puzzling verdicts, its unaccountable clemency to the wolf, its inflexible severity for the lamb, above all, its holy horror of a blot that has been scored, of a sin, then only unpardonable, that has been "found out."

Men love the women on whom they set their affections so differently. For some—and these are great favourites with the sex—attachment means the desire of a tiger for its prey. With others it is the gratification a child finds in a toy. A small minority entertain the superstition of a savage for his idol; a smaller yet offer the holy homage of a true worshipper to his saint. A woman's heart pines for unrivalled sovereignty—a woman's nature requires the strong hand of a master to retain it in bondage. For this, as for every other earthly state, there is no unalloyed happiness, no perfect enjoyment, no complete repose. The gourd has its worm, the diamond its flaw, the rose its earwigs, and

"The trail of the serpent is over them all."

So Tom Ryfe, taking time by the forelock, breakfasted at ten, wrote several letters with considerable coolness and forethought, all bearing on the event in contemplation, some providing for a week's absence abroad, at least, smoked a cigar in Lord Bearwarden's bedroom, who was not yet up, and towards noon turned out of Oxford Street to fulfil his mission with Simon Perkins the painter.

His step was lighter, his whole appearance more elate, than usual. The traces of recent illness and over-night's fatigue had disappeared. He was above all foolish fancies of luck, presentiments, and such superstitions—a man not easily acted on by extraneous circumstances of good or evil, trusting chiefly in his own resources, and believing very firmly in nothing but the multiplication table; yet to-day he told himself he "felt like a winner"; to-day victory seemed in his grasp, and he trod the pavement with the confident port of that pride which the proverb warns us "goeth before a fall."

He rang the door-bell and was vaguely directed to proceed up-stairs by the nondescript maid-servant who admitted him. The place was dark, the day sultry, the steps numerous. Tom climbed them leisurely, hat in hand, wondering why people couldn't live on the ground-floor, and not a little absorbed in preparation of such a plausible tale as should bring the contemplated interview to a warlike termination.

Turning imaginary periods with certain grandiloquent phrases concerning delicacy of feeling and high sense of honour, he arrived at the second landing, where he paused to take breath. Tom's illness had no doubt weakened his condition, but the gasp with which he now opened his mouth denoted excess of astonishment rather than deficiency of wind.

Spinning deftly into its place, as if dropped from heaven with a plumb-line, a wreath of artificial flowers landed lightly on his temples, while a woman's laugh, soft and silvery, accompanied with its pleasant music this unexpected coronation.

Tom looked up aghast, but he was not quick enough to catch sight of more than the hem of a garment, the turn of an ankle. There was a smothered exclamation, a "my gracious!" denoting extremity of dismay, a rustle of skirts, the loud bang of a door, and all became still. "Deuced odd," thought Tom, removing the wreath and wondering where he should put it, before he made his entrance. "Queer sort of people these! Painter a regular Don Giovanni, no doubt. So much the better—all the more likely to go in for the fuss and *éclat* of a duel."

So Tom flung his garland aside and prepared to assume a lofty presence with his hand on the painting-room door, while Nina, blushing to the roots of her hair, barricaded herself carefully into a small dressing-closet opening on the studio, in which retreat it was Simon's habit to wash his hands and smarten himself up when he had done work for the day.

Poor Nina! To use her own expression, she was "horrified." She expected Dick Stanmore, and with a girlish playfulness sufficiently denoting the terms on which they stood, had been lying in wait at the top of the stairs,

preparing to take a good shot, and drop the wreath, one of Simon's faded properties, on that head which she now loved better than all the world besides.

The staircase, I have said, was gloomy. Young gentlemen all brush their hair the same way. The missile was out of her fingers ere a horrid suspicion crossed her that she had made a mistake; and when Tom looked up there was nothing for it but *sauve qui peut!* After all, one head, perhaps, also, one heart, is very like another; but Nina had not yet mastered this, the first element of a rational philosophy, and would have fled, if she could, to the ends of the earth.

In the meantime she took refuge in the little room off the studio, blushing, palpitating, very much ashamed, though more than half amused, but firmly resolved not to leave her hiding-place nor face the visitor, devoutly hoping, at the same time, that he might not stay long.

Simon was in the act of lifting his Fairy Queen into her usual position. She had been dethroned the day before, while he worked at a less congenial task. On his visitor's entrance he put her back with her face to the wall.

Tom made an exceedingly stiff bow. "Mr. Perkins, I believe?"

"Mr. Ryfe?" replied Simon, in the same half-interrogative tone, with a very stiff bow too.

"I am here on the part of Lord Bearwarden," said Tom. "And I have been referred to you by Mr. Stanmore. You expected me, no doubt."

"I had a communication from Mr. Stanmore an hour ago to that effect," answered Simon, with a gravity the more profound that he had some difficulty in repressing a smile. The painter was not without a sense of humour, and this "communication," as he called it, lay crumpled up in his waistcoat-pocket while he spoke. It ran thus—

"DEAR SIMON,—I have had a visit from a man named Ryfe that puzzles me exceedingly. He comes from Lord Bearwarden, and they want to fasten some sort of quarrel on me, but why, I cannot imagine. I was obliged to refer him to you. Of course we'll fight if we must; but try and make out what they are driving at, and which is the biggest

fool of the two. I think they're both mad! I shall be with you rather later than usual. In the meantime I leave the whole thing in your hands. I don't know Bearwarden well, but used to think him rather a good fellow. The other's an *awful* snob!"

Now I feel that it would be unbecoming on my part to tax a young lady with so mean an act as that of listening; nevertheless, each of the gentlemen in the studio thought proper to speak in so loud and indeed so pompous a voice that Miss Algernon could not avoid overhearing them. It was surely natural, then, that when Mr. Stanmore's name was brought into the colloquy she should have drawn nearer the door of the partition, and—well—not *tried* to avoid overhearing as much as possible of their dialogue.

The action of the farce amused her at first. It was soon to become interesting, exciting, terrible, even to the verge of tragedy.

"That makes my task easier," continued Mr. Ryfe. "He has explained, of course, the tendency of my instructions, the object of my visit. It only remains for us to fix time and place."

"He has explained *nothing*," answered the painter. "What is it you complain of, and of what nature is the dispute between Lord Bearwarden and my friend?"

Tom assumed an air of extreme candour, and opened his case artfully enough; but, forgetting that every painter is necessarily a physiognomist, omitted the precaution of turning his back to the light.

"You are on intimate terms with Mr. Stanmore, I believe," said he. "Yet in matters of so delicate a nature men of honour keep their own counsel very closely. It is possible you may not be aware of much in his daily life that you would disapprove—much that, under the circumstances, though I am no rigid moralist, appears inexcusable even to me."

How white that delicate face turned in the next room! How eagerly those dark eyes seemed trying to pierce the blank panels of the door!

"I have known Mr. Stanmore several years," answered the painter. "I have seen him almost every day of late.

I can only say you must be more explicit, Mr. Ryfe. I do not understand you yet."

"Do you mean to tell me you are ignorant of an entanglement, a *liaison*, a most untoward and unfortunate attachment, existing between Mr. Stanmore and a lady whose name I fear it will be impossible to keep out of the discussion?"

A wild misgiving, not altogether painful, shot through the painter while he thought of Nina; but, watching the speaker's face, as was his wont, and detecting a disparity of expression between eyes and mouth, he gathered that the man was trying to deceive him in some particular—not speaking the whole truth.

Miss Algernon, who could only listen, trembled and turned sick at heart.

"I think you must be misinformed, Mr. Ryfe," was Simon's reply.

The other smiled, as pitying such ignorance of social gossip and worldly scandal.

"Misinformed!" he repeated. "A man is not usually misinformed who trusts his own eyes. A husband cannot be called unreasonably dissatisfied whose wife tells him distinctly she is going to one place, and who sees her an hour after in company with the man he suspects at another. It is no use beating about the bush. You cannot ignore such outrages as these. I wish to spare everybody's feelings—yours, mine, even the lady's, and, above all, my poor friend's; but I must tell you, point-blank, that the intimacy which I have reason to believe existed between Mr. Stanmore and Lady Bearwarden has not been discontinued since her marriage; and I come to *you*, as that gentleman's friend, on Lord Bearwarden's behalf, to demand the only reparation that can be made for such injuries from man to man."

The painter opened his eyes, and Tom told himself he had made a good speech, very much to the point. Neither gentleman heard a faint moan in the next room, the cry of a gentle heart wounded to the quick.

"You mean they ought to fight," said Simon, still scrutinising the expression of the other's face.

"Precisely," answered Tom. "We must go abroad, I

fancy, for all our sakes. Can you be ready to start to-night? Tidal train, you know—nice weather for crossing—breakfast the other side—*demi-poulet* and bottle of moderate St. Julien—needn't stop long for that—Belgian frontier by the middle of the day—no sort of difficulty when once you're across the water. Shall I say to-morrow afternoon, somewhere in the neighbourhood of Mouscron? We can all go together, for that matter, and arrange the exact spot in ten minutes."

Tom spoke as if they were planning a picnic, with nothing whatever to dread but the chance of rain.

"Stop a moment," said the painter. "Not quite so fast, if you please. This is a matter of life and death. We can't settle it in five minutes, and as many words. You call yourself a man of the world, Mr. Ryfe, and, doubtless, have some familiarity with affairs of this kind, either from experience or hearsay. Do you seriously believe I am going to put my friend up as a target for yours to shoot at without some more definite information, some fuller explanation than you seem inclined to give? Lady Bearwarden has not left her home. My friend has been here every day of late with the utmost regularity. It seems impossible that Lord Bearwarden's suspicions can be well grounded. There must be some mistake, some misconception. Over-haste in a matter like this would be irrevocable, and ruinous to everybody concerned."

Nina was listening with all her might. Every word of Tom's answer sunk into her heart.

"My friend has left *his* home," said he, in a voice of assumed feeling. "I was at luncheon with them just before the disclosure took place. A happier couple you never saw. Lately married—new furniture—wedding-presents all over the place—delightful house, overlooking the Park. This paradise is now completely broken up. I confess I feel strongly on the subject. I know his lordship intimately. I can appreciate his good qualities. I have also the honour of Lady Bearwarden's acquaintance. The whole affair is extremely painful even to *me*, but I have a duty to perform, and I must go through with it. Mr. Perkins, we are wasting time, let us come to the main point at once."

Simon pondered for a minute, during which he made another narrow scrutiny of Tom Ryfe's face. Then he said, in the tone of a man who comes to a final decision, "I suppose you are right. I fear there is but one way out of it."

It did not escape the painter that, notwithstanding his obvious self-command, the other's countenance brightened far more than was natural at this admission. A duel in these days is a very serious matter to every one concerned, and why should this man seem so truly rejoiced at the progress of an affair that might put his own neck in danger of a halter?

Simon's natural shrewdness, of which, in common with many other simple-minded persons, he possessed a considerable share, warned him there was something more here than appeared at first sight—some mystery of which time alone was likely to afford the elucidation. Time he resolved accordingly to gain, and that without putting the other on his guard.

"But one way out of it," he repeated gravely. "I wish indeed it could be arranged otherwise. Still this is a serious matter—quite out of my usual line—I cannot undertake anything decided without advice, nor entirely on my own responsibility. My intention is to consult with a friend, an old military man. You shall have my definite answer in a day or two at farthest."

Again watching Mr. Ryfe's face, Simon observed it cloud with dissatisfaction, and his suspicions were confirmed. This fire-eater was evidently only anxious to hurry on the duel with unseemly haste, and make the principals fight at all risks.

"We object to delay," he exclaimed, "we object to publicity. The thing is plain enough as it stands. You will only complicate it by bringing others into council, and in such a case, surely, the fewer people aware of our intentions the better."

"I cannot help that," answered the painter, in a tone of decision. "My mind is made up, and I see my way clearly enough. You shall have our answer within forty-eight hours at farthest. I repeat, this is a matter in which I will not move an inch without the utmost certainty."

Tom began to lose his temper. "Your scruples will bring about a flagrant scandal," he exclaimed. "Lord Bearwarden is determined not to be cheated out of his redress. I know his intentions, and I know his character. There will be a personal collision, to the disgrace of every one concerned!"

"Then I shall recommend Stanmore to walk about with a thick stick," answered Simon coolly. "I often carry one myself, Mr. Ryfe," he added in a tone of marked significance, "and should not scruple to use it on occasion to the best of my abilities."

The painter, though a small, slight man, was utterly fearless. Looking Tom Ryfe straight in the eyes while he made this suggestive observation, the latter felt that nothing was to be gained by bullying, and the game was lost.

"I am surprised," he replied loftily, but with a ceremonious bow, as reminding the other that his character of ambassador was sacred. "I am disappointed. I wash my hands of the disagreeable results likely to arise from this unfortunate delay. I wish you good-morning, Mr. Perkins. I leave you my address, and I trust you will lose no time in making me acquainted with the result of your deliberations."

So Tom walked down-stairs with great dignity, though he smothered more than one bitter curse the while, passing without so much as a glance the rejected garland, lying where he had thrown it aside before he entered on his unsuccessful mission.

Had he been a little less stately in manner, a little more rapid of movement, he might have overtaken the very lady of whom he obtained a glimpse during his ascent. Nina Algernon was but a few paces ahead of him, scouring along at a speed only accomplished by those who feel that goad in the heart which stimulates exertion, far more effectually than the "spur in the head," proverbially supposed to be worth "two in the heels." Nina had overheard enough from her hiding-place to make her angry, unhappy, and anxious in the highest degree. Angry, first of all, with herself and him, to think that she could have set her affections on one who was untrue;

unhappy, to feel she still cared for him so much; anxious to gather from the cold-blooded courtesies of the odious Mr. Ryfe that a life so dear to her was in danger, that perhaps she might never see Dick Stanmore again. With this ghastly consideration, surged up fuller than ever the tide of love that had been momentarily obstructed, forcing her into action, and compelling her to take immediate steps for ascertaining his perfidy, while, at the same time, she warded off from him the penalties it entailed.

"He'll know I love him then," thought poor Nina. "But I'll never see him, nor speak to him, again—never—never! How *could* he? I wonder why men are so bad!"

To this end, acting on an impulse as unreasonable as it was essentially feminine, she resolved to seek Lady Bearwarden without delay, and throwing herself on the mercy of that formidable rival, implore advice and assistance for the safety of the man they both loved.

So she fled down-stairs, and was out of the house like a lapwing, just as Tom Ryfe's warlike colloquy with the painter came to a close.

Simon, missing her, after he had taken leave of his visitor, was not therefore disturbed nor alarmed by her absence. He accounted for it on the very natural supposition that she had met Dick Stanmore at the door, and pressed him into her service to act as convoy in some shopping expedition, before she sat down to her daily duty as a model for the Fairy Queen, now completed, all but a few folds of drapery, and a turn of the white hand.

Till she came back, however, the great work must remain at a standstill, and Simon had leisure to reflect on his late conversation with Mr. Ryfe, which astonished and perplexed him exceedingly.

Neither his astonishment, nor his perplexity, were decreased, to learn, on Dick's arrival, that he had no knowledge of Miss Algernon's movements—had not met her—had not seen her since yesterday, certainly expected to find her here, and was to the full as anxious and uncomfortable as the painter himself.

"This other business will keep cold, said Dick, in a great heat and fuss. "I don't care whether it will or not. It *must!* But we can't have Miss Algernon wandering

about London by herself. We can't, at least *I* can't, be easy a moment till I know what has become of her. You stay here, Simon, in case she should come back. After all, she may be shopping in the next street. I'll rush down to Putney at once, and find out if she's gone home. Don't be afraid. I won't alarm the old ladies. If she's not there I'll be back immediately. If she comes in while I'm gone, wait for me, or leave a line. Old man, if anything goes wrong with that darling, I—I've nothing left to live for in the world!"

Even while he spoke, he was on the stairs, and Simon, left in the painting-room, shook his head, and pondered.

"They'll never make me believe that cock-and-bull story about Lady Bearwarden. Ah, Nina! I begin to think this man loves you almost as well as I could have done!"

CHAPTER XXVII

BLINDED

Tom Ryfe, walking down Berners Street in the worst of humours, saw the whole game he had been playing slipping out of his hands. If there were to be no duel, all the trouble he had taken went for nothing; and even should there be an unseemly *fracas*, and should a meeting afterwards take place between Lord Bearwarden and Dick Stanmore, what good would it do him, if her ladyship's name were kept out of the quarrel? How he cursed this cockney painter's resolution and good sense! How he longed for some fierce encounter, some desperate measure, something, no matter what, that should bring affairs to a crisis! It seemed so silly, so childlike, to be baffled now. Yes, he had set his heart on Lady Bearwarden. The great master-passion of his life had gone on gathering and growing till it became, as such master-passions will, when there is neither honour nor religion to check them, a fury, over which he had lost all control. And he felt that, having gone so far, there was no crime, no outrage, he would shrink from committing, to obtain what he desired now.

When a man is thus ripe for evil he seldom wants opportunity. It must be admitted the devil never throws a chance away. Open your hand, and ere you can close it again, he slips a tool in, expressly adapted for the purpose you design—a tool that, before you have done with it, you may be sure, will cut your own fingers to the bone.

"Beg pardon, sir, can I speak to you for a minute?" said a gaudily-dressed, vulgar-looking personage, crossing

the street to accost Tom Ryfe as he emerged from the painter's house. "It's about a lady. About her ladyship, askin' your pardon. Lady Bearwarden, you know."

That name was a talisman to arrest Tom's attention. He looked his man over from head to foot, and thought he had never seen a more ruffianly bearing, a wilder, sadder face.

"Come up this by-street," said he. "Speak out—I'll keep your counsel, and I'll pay you well. That's what you mean, I suppose. That's business. What about Lady Bearwarden?"

The man cursed her deeply, bitterly, ere he replied—"I know *you*, sir, an' so I ought to, though you don't know *me*. Mr. Ryfe, I seen you in Belgrave Square, along of *her*. You was a-courtin' of her then. You owes her more than one good turn now, or I'm mistaken!"

"Who the devil are you?" asked Tom, startled, and with reason; yet conscious, in his dark, dreary despair, of a vague glimmer, bearing the same relation to hope that a will-o'-the-wisp does to the light on our hearth at home.

The man looked about him. That narrow street was deserted but for themselves.

He stared in Tom's face with a certain desperate frankness. "I'll tell ye who I am," said he; "if you an' me is to go in for this job, as true pals, let's have no secrets between us, an' bear no malice. They call me 'Gentleman Jim,' Mr. Ryfe, that's what they call *me*. I'm the man as hocussed you that there arternoon, down Westminster way. I was set on to that job, I was. Set on by *her*. I squeezed hard, I know. All in the way o' business. But I might have squeezed *harder*, Mr. Ryfe. You should think o' that!"

"You infernal scoundrel!" exclaimed Tom, yet in a tone neither so astonished nor so indignant as his informant expected. "If you had, you'd have been hanged for murder. Well, it's not *you* I ought to blame. What have you got to say? You can help me—I see it in your face. Out with it. You speak to a man as desperate as yourself."

"I knowed it!" exclaimed the other. "When you come out o' that there house, I seen it in the way as you slammed

to that there door. Says I, there's the man as I wants, an' the man as wants me! I follered you this mornin' from your hotel, an' a precious job I had keepin' up with your hansom, though the driver, as works by times with a pal o' mine, he kep' on easy when he could. I watched of the house, ah! an hour an' more, an' I never turned my head away but to get a drop o' beer from a lad as I sent round to the Grapes for a quart. Bless ye! I hadn't but just emptied the pot, when I see a lady—the very moral of her as we knows on—pops round the corner into Oxford Street. I was in two minds whether to foller, but thinks I, it's Mr. Ryfe as I'm a-lookin' for, an' if it *was* she, we couldn't trap her now, not in a crowded place like that. Besides, I see a servant-gal takin' home the beer drop her a curtsey as she went by. No, it couldn't be my lady; but if so be as you an' me is of the same mind, Mr. Ryfe, my lady shall be safe in a cage afore this time to-morrow, and never a man to keep the key but yourself, Mr. Ryfe, if you'll only be guided by a true friend."

"Who set you on to this?" asked Tom, coolly enough, considering that his blood was boiling with all the worst and fiercest passions of his nature. "What do *you* expect to gain from injury inflicted on" (he could not get the name out)—"on the lady you mention?"

Jim laughed—a harsh, grating laugh. "You're a deep 'un, Mr. Ryfe!" he answered. "I won't deceive you. I put this here in your way because there's two things as I must have to work the job as I ain't got. One's money, and t'other's gumption. I ain't rich enough, and I ain't hartful enough. I owe my lady a turn, too, never you mind what for, and strike me dead but I'll pay it up! I ain't a-going to say as I wouldn't ha' worked this here off, clear, single-handed, if I'd had the chance. I'm not telling you a lie, Mr. Ryfe; you and me can do it together, an' I'll only charge you fair and reasonable. Ah! not half what you'd take an' offer this minute if I was to stand out for a price."

Tom Ryfe turned round, put both hands on the other's shoulders, and laughed too.

"We understand each other," said he. "Never mind the price. If the work's done to please me, I'm not likely

to grudge the money. You've some plan in your head by which you think we can both gain what we most desire. I know you're a resolute fellow. Hang it! my throat's still sore where you got that cursed grip of yours inside my collar. You can believe I'm not easily thwarted, or I should hardly be here now. Explain yourself. Let me know your plan. If it is anything like practicable, you and I ought to be able to carry it out."

Then Jim, not without circumlocution and many hideous oaths, detailed in his hearer's willing ears the scheme he had in view. He proposed, with Mr. Ryfe's assistance, to accomplish no less flagrant an outrage than the forcible abduction of Lady Bearwarden from her home. He suggested that his listener, of whose skill in penmanship he entertained a high opinion, should write such a letter as might lure her ladyship into a lonely, ill-lighted locality, not far from her own door; and Tom, appreciating the anxiety she must now feel about her husband's movements, saw no difficulty in the accomplishment of such a stratagem. This desperate couple were then to be ready with a four-wheeled cab, a shawl, and a cleverly-constructed gag, in which screaming was impossible. Tom should enact the part of driver, while Jim, being the stronger man of the two, should seize and pinion her ladyship in his grasp. Mute and muffled, she was to be forced into the cab, which could then be driven off to that very lodging in the purlieus of Westminster which Tom knew, by his own experiences, was far removed from assistance or inquiry. Once in Mr. Ryfe's hands, Jim observed, the captive would only be too glad to make terms, and arrangements for taking her out of London down the river, or in any other direction, could be entered into at leisure. Mr. Ryfe surely would not require more than twelve hours to come to an understanding with a lady irrevocably in his power. And all the while, deep in this bold villain's breast lurked a dark, fierce, terrible reflection that one more crime, only one more—almost, indeed, an act of wild retributive justice on his confederate—and that proud, tameless woman would be crouching in the dust, praying for mercy at the feet of the desperate man she had reviled and despised.

Gentleman Jim, maddened by a course of dram-drinking,

blinded by an infatuation that itself constituted insanity, was hardly to be considered an accountable being. It may be that under the mass of guilt and impurity with which his whole being was loaded, there glimmered some faint spark of manlier and worthier feeling; it may be, that he entertained some vague notion of appearing before the high-born lady in the light of a preserver, with the blood of the smoother and more polished scoundrel on his hands, and of setting her free, while he declared his hopeless, his unalterable devotion, sealed by the sacrifice of two lives, for, as he often expressed it in imaginary conversations with his idol, "he asked no better than to swing for her sake!"

Who knows? Fanaticism has its martyrs, like religion. It is not only the savage heathen who run under Juggernaut every day. Diseased brains, corrupt hearts, and impossible desires go far to constitute aberration of intellect. Unreasoning love, and unlimited liquor, will make a man fool enough for anything.

Tom Ryfe listened, well pleased. For him there was neither the excuse of drink nor despair, yet he, too, entertained some notion of home and happiness hereafter, when she found nobody in the world to turn to but himself, and had forgiven him her wrongs because of the tenacity with which he clung to her in spite of all.

Of his friend, and the position he must leave him in, he made no account.

Something very disagreeable came across him, indeed, when he thought of Lord Bearwarden's resolute character —his practical notions concerning the redress of injury or insult; but all such apprehensions were for the future. The present must be a time of action. If only to-night's *coup de main* should come off successfully, he might cross the Atlantic with his prey, and remain in safe seclusion till the outrage had been so far forgotten by the public that those at home whom it most affected would be unwilling to rekindle the embers of a scandal half-smothered and dying out. Tom Ryfe was not without ready money. He calculated he could live for at least a year in some foreign clime, far beyond the western wave, luxuriously enough. A year! With *her!* Why it seemed an

eternity; and even in that moment his companion was wondering, half-stupidly, how Mr. Ryfe would look with his throat cut, or his head laid open, weltering in blood; and when and where it would be advisable to put this finishing stroke of murder and perfidy to the crimes he meditated to-night.

Ere these confederates parted, however, two letters had to be written in a stationer's shop. They were directed by the same pen, though apparently in different handwritings, to Lord and Lady Bearwarden at their respective addresses.

The first was as follows—

"DEAR LORD BEARWARDEN,

"They won't fight! All sorts of difficulties have been made, and even if we can obtain a meeting at last, it must be after considerable delay. In the meantime I have business of my own which forces me to leave town for four-and-twenty hours at least. If possible, I will look you up before I start. If not, send a line to the office. I shall find it on my return: these matters complicate themselves as they go on, but I still venture to hope you may leave the conduct of the present affair with perfect safety in my hands, and I remain, with much sympathy,

"Your lordship's obedient servant,

"THOMAS RYFE."

The second, though a very short production, took longer time, both in composition and penmanship. It was written purposely on a scrap of paper from which the stationer's name and the water-mark had been carefully torn off. It consisted but of these lines—

"A cruel mystery has deprived you of your husband. You have courage. Walk out to-night at eight, fifty yards from your own door. Turn to the right—I will meet you and explain all.

"My reputation is at stake. I trust you as one woman trusts another. Seek to learn no more."

"That will bring her," thought Tom, "for she fears nothing!" and he sealed the letter with a dab of black

wax flattened by the impression of the woman's thimble, who kept the shop.

There was a Court Guide on the counter. Tom Ryfe knew Lady Bearwarden's address as well as his own, yet from a methodical and lawyer-like habit of accuracy, seeing that it lay open at the letter B, he glanced his eye, and ran his finger down the page to stop at the very bottom, and thus verify, as it were, his own recollection of his lordship's number, ere he paid for the paper and walked away to post his letters in company with Jim, who waited outside.

The stationer, fitting shelves in his back shop, was a man of observation and some eccentricity.

"Poll," said he to his wife, "it's an uncertain business, is the book-trade. A Court Guide hasn't been asked for over that counter, no, not for six months, and here's two parties come in and look at it in a morning. There's nothing goes off, to depend on, but hymns. Both of 'em wanted the same address, I do believe, for I took notice each stopped in the same column at the very foot. Nothing escapes me, lass! However, that isn't no business of yours nor mine."

The wife, a woman of few words and abrupt demeanour, made a pounce at the Court Guide to put it back in its place, but her "master," as she somewhat inconsequently called him, interposed.

"Let it be, lass!" said he. "There's luck in odd numbers, they say. Who knows but we mayn't have a third party come in on the same errand? Let it be, and go make the toast. It's getting on for tea-time, and the fire in the back parlour's nearly out."

When these letters were posted, the confederates, feeling themselves fairly embarked on their joint scheme, separated to advance each his own share of the contemplated enormity. Tom Ryfe jumped into a cab, and was off on a multiplicity of errands, while Jim, pondering deeply with his head down, and his hands thrust into his coat-pockets, slunk towards Holborn, revolving in his mind the least he could offer some dissipated cabman, whose licence was in danger at any rate, for the hire of horse and vehicle during the ensuing night.

Feeling his sleeve plucked feebly from behind, he broke off these meditations, to turn round with a savage oath.

What a dreary face was that which met his arm! Pale and gaunt, with the hollow eyes that denote bodily suffering, and the deep cruel lines that speak of mental care. What a thin wasted hand was laid on his burly arm, in its velveteen sleeve; and what a weak faint voice in trembling accents, urged its sad, wistful prayer.

"Speak to me, Jim—won't you speak to me, dear? I've looked for you day and night, and followed you mile after mile till I'm ready to lie down and die here on the cold stones."

"Bother!" replied Jim, shaking himself free. "I'm busy, I tell ye. What call had you, I should like to know, to be tracking, and hunting of me about, as if I was a—well—a fancy dog we'll say, as had strayed out of a parlour? Go home, I tell ye, or it'll be the worse for ye!"

"You don't love me no more, Jim!" said the woman. There was a calm sadness in her voice speaking of that resignation which is but the apathy of despair.

"Well—I don't. There!" replied Jim, acceding to this proposition with great promptitude.

"But you can't keep me off of loving *you*, Jim," she replied, with a wild stare; "nobody can't keep me off of that. Won't ye think better of it, old man? Give us one chance more, that's a good chap. It's for dear life I'm askin'!"

She had wound both hands round his arm, and was hanging to it with all her weight. How light a burden it seemed, to which those limp rags clung so shabbily, compared with the substantial frame he remembered in former days, when Dorothea was honest, hard-working, and happy.

"It ain't o' no use tryin' on of these here games," said he, unclasping the poor weak hands with brutal force. "Come! I can't stop all day. Shut up, I tell ye! you'll wish you had by and by."

"O! Jim," she pleaded. "Is it come to this? Never say it, dear. If you and me is to part in anger now we'll not meet again. Leastways, not on this earth. And if it's

true, as I was taught at Sunday-school, heaven's too good a place for *us!*"

"Go to h—ll!" exclaimed the ruffian furiously; and he flung her from him with a force that would have brought her to the ground had she not caught at the street railings for support.

She moaned and sat down on a doorstep a few paces off, without looking up.

For a moment Jim's heart smote him, and he thought to turn back, but in his maddened brain there rose a vision of the pale, haughty face, the queenly bearing, the commanding gestures that bade him kneel to worship, and with another oath—remorseless, pitiless, untouched, and unrepentant—he passed on to his iniquity.

Dorothea sat with head bent down, and hands clasped about her knees, unconscious, as it seemed, of all the world outside. The heart knoweth its own bitterness, and who shall say what expiation she may not have made for sin in that dull trance of pain which took no note of circumstance, kept no count of time?

Ere long, a policeman, good-humoured but imperative, touched her on the shoulder, and bade her "move on."

The face that looked up to him puzzled this functionary extremely. The woman was sober enough, he could see, and yet there seemed something queer about her, uncommon queer: he was blessed if he knew what to make of her, and he had been a goodish time in the force, too!

She thanked him very quietly. She had been taking a rest, she said, thinking no harm, for she was tired, and now she would go home. Yes, she was dead-tired, she had better go home!

Wrapping her faded shawl about her, she glided on, instinctively avoiding the jostling of foot-passengers and the trampling of horses, proceeding at an even, leisurely pace, with something of the sleep-walker's wandering step and gestures. The roll of wheels came dull and muffled on her ear: those were phantoms surely, those meaningless faces that met her in the street, not living men and women, and yet she had a distinct perception of an apple-woman's stall, of some sham jewelry she saw in a shop-

window. She was near turning back then, but it didn't seem worth while, and it was less trouble to plod stupidly on, always westward, always towards the setting sun!

Without knowing how she got there, presently she felt tufts of grass beneath her feet dank with dew, growing greener and coarser under large towering elms. O! she knew an elm-tree well enough! She was country bred, she was, and could milk a cow long ago.

It wasn't Kensington Gardens, was it? She didn't remember whether she'd ever been here before or not. She'd heard of the place, of course, indeed Jim had promised to take her there some Sunday. Then she shivered from head to foot, and wrapped her shawl tight round her as she walked on.

What was that shining far-off between the trees, cool, and quiet, and bright, like heaven? Could it be the water? That was what had brought her, to be sure. She remembered all about it now and hurried forward with quick, irregular steps, causing her breath to come thick, and her heart to beat with sudden choking throbs.

She pulled at her collar, and undid its fastenings. She took her bonnet off and swung it in her hand. The soiled tawdry ribbon had been given her by Jim, long ago. Was it long ago? She couldn't tell, and what did it matter? She wouldn't have looked twice at it a while back. She might kiss and cuddle it now, if she'd a mind.

What a long way off that water seemed! Not there yet, and she had been walking—walking like the wayfarer she remembered to have read of in the *Pilgrim's Progress*. All in a moment, with a flash, as it were, of its own light, there it lay glistening at her feet. Another step and she would have been in head-foremost! There was time enough. How cool and quiet it looked! She sat down on the brink and wondered why she was born!

Would Jim feel it very much? Ah! they'd none of them care for him like she used. He'd find that out at last. How could he? How *could* he? She'd given him fair warning!

She'd do it now. This moment, while she'd a mind to it. Afraid! Why should she be afraid? Better than the gin-palace! Better than the workhouse! Better

than the cold cruel streets! She couldn't be worse off anywhere than here! Once! Twice!

Her head swam. She was rising to her feet, when a light touch rested on her shoulder, and the sweetest voice that had ever sounded in poor Dorothea's ears, whispered softly, "You are ill, my good woman. Don't sit here on the damp grass. Come home with me."

What did it mean? Was it over? Could this be one of the angels, and had she got to heaven after all? No; there were the trees, the grass, the distant roar of the city, and the peaceful water—fair, smooth, serene, like the face of a friend.

She burst into a fit of hysterical weeping, cowering under that kindly touch as if it had been a mountain to crush her, rocking herself to and fro, sobbing out wildly, "I wish I was dead! I wish I was dead!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

BEAT

LIKE a disturbed spirit Lady Bearwarden wandered about in the fever of a sorrow, so keen that her whole soul would sometimes rise in rebellion against the unaccustomed pain. There was something stifling to her senses in the fact of remaining between the four walls of a house. She panted for air, motion, freedom, and betook herself to Kensington Gardens, partly because that beautiful retreat lay within an easy walk of her house, partly perhaps, that for her, as for many of us, it had been brightened by a certain transient and delusive light which turns everything to gold while it lasts, leaves everything but a dull dim copper when it has passed away.

It was a benevolent and merciful restriction, no doubt, that debarred our first parents from re-entering the paradise they had forfeited. Better far to carry away unsullied and unfaded the sweet sad memories of the Happy Land, than revisit it to find weeds grown rank, fountains dry, the skies darkened, the song of birds hushed, its bloom faded off the flower, and its glory departed from the day.

She used to sit here in the shade with *him*. There was the very tree. Even the broken chair they had laughed at was not mended, and yet for her a century ago could not have seemed a more hopeless past. Other springs would bloom with coming years, other summers glow, and she could not doubt that many another worshipper would kneel humbly and gratefully at her shrine, but their votive garlands could never more glisten with the fresh dew of

morning, the fumes from their lower altars, though they might lull the senses and intoxicate the brain, could never thrill like that earlier incense, with subtle sudden poison to her heart.

To be sure, on more than one occasion she had walked here with Dick Stanmore too. It was but human nature, I suppose, that she should have looked on that gentleman's grievances from a totally different point of view. It couldn't be half so bad in his case, she argued, men had so many resources, so many distractions. She was sorry for him, of course, but he couldn't be expected to feel a disappointment of this nature like a woman, and, after all, theirs was more a flirtation than an attachment. He need not have minded it so very much, and had probably fancied he cared a great deal more than he really did.

It is thus we are all prone to reason, gauging the tide of each other's feelings by the ebb and flow of our own.

Love, diffused amongst the species, is the best and purest of earthly motives, concentrated on the individual it seems but a dual selfishness after all.

There were few occupants of the Gardens; here two or three nursery-maids and children, there a foreign gentleman reading a newspaper. Occasionally, in some rare sequestered nook, an umbrella, springing up unnecessarily and defiantly like a toadstool, above two male legs and a muslin skirt. Lady Bearwarden passed on, with a haughty step, and a bitter smile.

There is something of freemasonry in sorrow. Dorothea's vague abstracted gait arrested Maud's attention even from a distance, and involuntarily the delicate lady followed on the track of that limp shabby figure with which she had but this one unconscious link, of a common sorrow, an aching heart.

Approaching nearer, she watched the poor sufferer with a curiosity that soon grew to interest and even alarm.

While Dorothea sat herself down by the water's edge, her ladyship looked round in vain for a policeman or a park-keeper, holding herself in readiness to prevent the horror she already anticipated, and which drove clear off her mind every thought of her own regrets and despondency.

There was no time to lose; when the despairing woman half rose to her feet, Lady Bearwarden interposed, calm, collected, and commanding in the courage which had hitherto never failed her in an emergency.

That burst of hysterical tears, that despairing cry, "I wish I was dead!" told her for the present Dorothea was saved. She sat down on the grass by her side. She took the poor coarse hands in her own. She laid the drooping head on her lap, and with gentle, loving phrases, such as soothe a suffering child, encouraged the helpless wretch to weep and sob her fill.

She could have wept too for company, because of the load that seemed lifted in an instant from her own breast; but this was a time for action, and at such a season it was no part of Maud's nature to sit down and cry.

It was long ere the numbed heart and surcharged brain had relieved themselves sufficiently for apprehension and intelligible speech. Dorothea's first impulse, on coming to herself, was to smooth her unkempt hair and apologise for the disorder of her costume.

"Never mind your dress," said Lady Bearwarden, resuming, now the crisis was past, her habitual air of authority, conscious that it would be most efficacious under the circumstances. "You are tired and exhausted. You must have food and rest. I ask no questions, and I listen to no explanations, at least till to-morrow. Can you walk to the gate? You must come home with me."

"O, miss! O, my lady!" stammered poor Dorothea, quite overcome by such unlikely sympathy, such unexpected succour. "It's too much! It's too much! I'm not fit for it! If you only knowed what I am!" then, lifting her eyes to the other's face, a pang, keener than all previous sufferings, went through her woman's heart like the thrust of a knife. It all came on her at once. This beautiful being, clad in shining raiment, who had saved and soothed her like an angel from heaven, was the pale girl Jim had gone to visit in her stately, luxurious home, when she followed him so far through those weary streets on the night of the thunderstorm.

She could bear no more. Her physical system gave way, just as a tree that has sustained crash after crash falls

with the last well-directed blow. She rolled her eyes, lifted both bare arms above her head, and with a faint despairing cry, went down at Lady Bearwarden's feet, motionless and helpless as the dead.

But assistance was at hand at last. A park-keeper helped to raise the prostrate figure. An elderly gentleman volunteered to fetch a cab. Amongst them they supported Dorothea to the gate and placed her in the vehicle. The park-keeper touched his hat, the elderly gentleman made a profusion of bows, and as many offers of assistance which were declined, while Maud, soothing and supporting her charge, told the driver where to stop. As they jingled and rattled away from the gate, a pardonable curiosity prompted the elderly gentleman to inquire the name of this beautiful Samaritan, clad in silks and satins, so ready to succour the fallen and give shelter to the homeless. The park-keeper took his hat off, looked in the crown, and put it on again.

"I see her once afore under them trees," he said, "with a gentleman. I see a many and I don't often take notice. But she's a rare sort, she is! and as good as she's good-looking. I wish you a good-evening, sir."

Then he retired into his cabin and ruminated on this "precious start," as he called it, during his tea.

Meantime, Maud took her charge home, and would fain have put her to bed. For this sanatory measure, however, Dorothea, who had recovered consciousness, seemed to entertain an unaccountable repugnance. She consented, indeed, to lie down for an hour or two, but could not conceal a wild, restless anxiety to depart as soon as possible. Something more than the obvious astonishment of the servants, something more than the incongruity of the situation, seemed prompting her to leave Lady Bearwarden's house without delay and fly from the presence of almost the first friend she had ever known in her life.

When the bustle and excitement consequent on this little adventure had subsided, her ladyship found herself once more face to face with her own sorrow, and the despondency she had shaken off during a time of action gathered again all the blacker and heavier round her heart. She was glad to find distraction in the arrival of

a nameless visitor, announced by the most pompous of footmen as "a young person desirous of waiting on her ladyship."

"Show her up," said Lady Bearwarden; and for the first time in their lives the two sisters stood face to face.

Each started, as if she had come suddenly on her own reflection in a mirror. During a few seconds both looked stupefied, bewildered. Lady Bearwarden spoke first.

"You wish to see me, I believe. A sick person has just been brought into the house, and we are rather in confusion. I fear you have been kept waiting."

"I called while your ladyship was out," answered Nina. "So I walked about till I thought you must have come home again. You've never seen me before—I didn't even know where you lived—I found your address in the Court Guide—O! I can't say it properly, but I did so want to speak to you. I hope I haven't done anything rude or wrong."

There was no mistaking the refinement of Nina's voice and manner.

Lady Bearwarden recognised one of her own station at a glance. And this girl so like herself—how beautiful she was! How beautiful they both were!

"What can I do for you?" said her ladyship, very kindly. "Sit down; I am sure you must be tired."

But Nina had too much of her sister's character to feel tired when there was a purpose to carry out. The girl stood erect and looked full in her ladyship's face. All unconscious of their relationship, the likeness between them was at this moment so striking as to be ludicrous.

"I have come on a strange errand, Lady Bearwarden," said Nina, hardening her heart for the impending effort—"I have come to tell a truth and to put a question. I suppose, even now, you have some regard for your husband?"

Lady Bearwarden started. "What do you know about my husband?" she asked, turning very pale.

"That he is in danger," was the answer, in a voice of such preternatural fortitude as promised a speedy break-

down. "That he is going to fight a duel—and it's about *you*—with—with Mr. Stanmore! O! Lady Bearwarden, how *could* you? You'd everything in the world, everything to make a woman good and happy, and now, see what you've done!"

Tears and choking sobs were coming thick, but she kept them back.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Maud, trembling in every limb, for through the dark midnight of her misery she began to see gleams of a coming dawn.

"I mean *this*," answered Nina, steadying herself bravely. "Lord Bearwarden has found everything out. He has sent a challenge to Mr. Stanmore. I—I—care for Mr. Stanmore, Lady Bearwarden—at least, I *did*. I was engaged to him." (Here, notwithstanding the tumult of her feelings, a little twinge crossed Lady Bearwarden to learn how quickly Dick had consoled himself.) "I'm only a girl, but I know these things *can* be prevented, and that's why I'm here now. You've done the mischief; you are bound to repair it; and I have a right to come to you for help."

"But I haven't done anything!" pleaded Maud, in far humbler tones than she habitually used. "I love my husband very dearly, and I've not set eyes on Mr. Stanmore but once since I married, in Oxford Street, looking into a shop-window, and directly he caught sight of me, he got out of the way as if I had the plague! There's some mistake. Not a minute should be lost in setting it right. I wonder what we ought to do!"

"And—and you're not in love with Mr. Stanmore? and he isn't going to run away with you? Lady Bearwarden, are you quite sure? And I don't deserve to be so happy. I judged him so harshly, so unkindly. What will he think of me when he knows it? He'll never speak to me again."

Then the tears came in good earnest, and presently Miss Algernon grew more composed, giving her hostess an account of herself, her prospects, her Putney home, and the person she most depended on in the world to get them all out of their present difficulty, Simon Perkins, the painter.

"I know he can stop it," pursued Nina eagerly, "and he will, too. He told the other man nothing should be done in a hurry. I heard him say so, for I listened, Lady Bearwarden, I *did*. And I would again if I had the same reason. Wouldn't *you?* I hope the other man will be hanged. He seemed to want them so to kill each other. Don't you think he can be punished? For it's murder, you know, *really*, after all."

Without entering into the vexed question of duelling—a practice for which each lady in her heart entertained a secret respect—the sisters consulted long and earnestly on the best method of preventing a conflict that should endanger the two lives now dearer to them than ever.

They drank tea over it, we may be sure, and in the course of that refreshment could not fail to observe how the gloves they laid aside were the same number (six and three-quarters, if you would like to know), how their hands were precisely similar in shape, how the turn of their arms and wrists corresponded as closely as the tone of their voices. Each thought she liked the other better than any one she had ever met of her own sex.

After a long debate it was decided that Nina should return at once to her Putney home, doubtless ere now much disturbed at her prolonged absence; that she should have full powers to inform Simon of all the confidences regarding her husband Lady Bearwarden had poured in her ear; should authorise him to seek his lordship out and tell him the whole truth on his wife's behalf; also, finally, for women rarely neglect the worship of Nemesis, that after a general reconciliation had been effected, measures should be taken for bringing to condign punishment the false friend who had been at such pains to foment hostilities between the men they both loved.

Lady Bearwarden had her hand on the bell to order the carriage for her visitor, but the latter would not hear of it.

"I can get a cab every twenty yards in this part of the town," said Nina. "I shall be home in three-quarters of an hour. It's hardly dark yet, and I'm quite used to going about by myself. I am not at all a coward, Lady

Bearwarden, but my aunts would be horribly alarmed if one of your smart carriages drove up to the gate. Besides, I don't believe it could turn round in the lane. No; I won't even have a servant, thanks. I'll put my bonnet on and start at once, please. You've been very kind to me, and I'm so much obliged. Good-night!"

CHAPTER XXIX

NIGHT-HAWKS

Lord Bearwarden's groom of the chambers, a person by no means deficient in self-confidence, owned that he was mystified. Amongst all the domestic dissensions with which his situation had made him familiar, he could recall nothing like his present experience. This bringing home of a shabby woman out of the street and ordering the best bedroom for her reception; this visit of a beautiful young person so exactly resembling his mistress that, but for the evidence of his own senses, when he brought in tea and found them together, he could have sworn it was her ladyship; this general confusion of household arrangements, and culpable indifference to the important ceremony of dinner, forced him to admit that he was in a position of which he had no preconceived idea, and from which he doubted whether he could extricate himself with the dignity essential to his office.

Returning to his own department, and glancing at the letter-box in the hall, he reflected with satisfaction how his professional duties had been scrupulously fulfilled, and how in accordance with his misconception of Lord Bearwarden's orders, every packet that reached the house had been forwarded to its master without delay.

Hence it came to pass, that the vexed and angry husband received in due course of post a letter which puzzled him exceedingly.

He had only just digested Tom Ryfe's unwelcome missive, announcing somewhat vaguely that the revenge for

which he panted must be delayed two or three days at least, and had cursed, energetically enough, his own friend's mismanagement of the affair, with the scruples entertained by the other side, when a fresh budget was placed in his hands, and he opened the envelopes as people often do, without looking at their addresses: thus it fell out, that he read the anonymous letter directed to his wife, asking for a meeting that same night, in the vicinity of his own house.

"A cruel mystery has deprived you of your husband." What could it mean? He studied the brief communication very attentively, particularly that first line. And a vague hope rose in his loving, generous heart, that he might have judged her too harshly after all. It was but the faintest spark, yet he tried hard to kindle it into flame. The wariest rogue is never armed on all sides. He is sure to forget some trifling precaution, that, left unguarded, is like the chink in a shutter to let in the light of day. Lord Bearwarden recognised the same hand that had penned the anonymous letter he received on guard—this argued a plot of some sort. He resolved to sift the matter thoroughly, and instead of forwarding so mysterious a request to his wife, repair to the indicated spot in person, and there by threats, bribery, compulsion, any or all means in his power, arrive at a true solution of the mystery.

It was a welcome distraction, too, this new idea, with which to while away the weary interminable day. It seemed well perhaps, after all, that the duel had been postponed. He might learn something to-night that would change the whole current of his actions, if not, let Mr. Stanmore look to himself!

That gentleman, in the meantime, had completely forgotten Lord Bearwarden's existence—had forgotten Mr. Ryfe's visit the night before at his club, the unintelligible quarrel, the proposed meeting, everything but that Nina was lost. Lost! a stray lamb, helpless in the streets of London! His blood ran cold to think of it. He hastened down to Putney, and indeed only knew that he had made so sure of finding her there, by his disappointment to learn she had not returned home. It made his task no easier that Aunt Susannah was in the garden when he reached

the house, and he had to dissemble his alarm in presence of that weak-minded and affectionate spinster. "He was passing by," he said, "on his way to town, and only looked in (he couldn't stay a moment) to know if they had any message to—to their nephew. He was going straight from here to the painting-room."

"How considerate!" said Aunt Susannah; not without reason, for it was but this morning they parted with Simon, and they expected him back to dinner. "We have a few autumn flowers left. I'll just run in, and get the scissors to make up a nosegay. It won't take ten minutes. O! nothing like ten minutes! You can give it to poor Simon with our dear love. He's so fond of flowers! and Nina too. But perhaps you know Nina's tastes as well as we do, and indeed I think they're very creditable to her, and she's not at all a bad judge!"

Then the good lady, shaking her grey curls, smiled and looked knowing, while Dick cursed her below his breath, for a grinning old idiot, and glared wildly about him, like a beast in a trap seeking some way of escape. It was provoking, no doubt, to be kept talking platitudes to a silly old woman in the garden, while every moment drifted his heart's treasure farther and farther into the uncertainty he scarcely dared to contemplate.

Some women are totally deficient in the essentially feminine quality of tact. Aunt Susannah, with a pocket-handkerchief tied round her head, might have stood drivelling nonsense to her visitor for an hour, and never found out he wanted to get away. Fortunately, she went indoors for her scissors, and Dick, regardless of the proprieties, made his escape forthwith, thus avoiding also the ignominy of carrying back to London a nosegay as big as a chimney-sweep's on May-day.

Hastening to the painting-room, his worst fears were realised. Nina had not returned. Simon, too, began to share his alarm, and not without considerable misgivings did the two men hold counsel on their future movements.

It occurred to them at this juncture, that the maid-of-all-work below-stairs might possibly impart some information as to the exact time when the young lady left the

house. They rang for that domestic accordingly, and bewildered her with a variety of questions in vain.

Had she seen Miss Algernon during the morning? She was to think, and take time, and answer without being frightened.

"Miss Algernon! Lor! that was her as come here most days, along o' him," with a backward nod at Dick. "No—she hadn't a-seen her to-day, she was sure. Not *particler*, that was. Not more nor any other day."

"Had she seen her at all?"

"O, yes! she'd seen her at all. In course, you know, she couldn't be off of seeing her at all!"

"When did she see her?"

"When? O! last week, every day a'most. And the week afore that too! She wasn't a-goin' to tell a lie!"

"Then she hadn't seen her this morning?"

"Yes, she'd seen her this morning. When she come in, you know, along o' the other gentleman." Here a dive of the shock head at Simon, and symptoms of approaching emotion.

"Why you said you hadn't at first!" exclaimed Dick, perplexed and provoked.

Forthwith a burst of sobs and tears.

"Compose yourself, my good girl," said the painter kindly. "We don't want to hurry nor confuse you. We are in great distress ourselves. Miss Algernon went out, we believe, to take a walk. She has not returned here, nor gone home. It would help us very much if we knew the exact time at which she left the house, or could find anybody who saw her after she went away."

If you want a woman to help you, even a maid-of-all-work, tell her your whole story, and make no half-confidences: the drudge brightened up through her tears, and assumed a look of intelligence at once.

"Lor!" said she, "why didn't ye say so? In course I see the young lady, as I was a-fetchin' in the dinner beer. She'd a-got her bonnet on, I took notice, and was maybe goin' for a walk, or to get a few odds and ends, or such like."

Here a full stop with a curtsey. The men looked at each other and waited.

"She went into a shop round the corner, for I seen her myself. A stationer's shop it were. An' I come home then, with the beer, an' shut to the door, an' I couldn't tell you no more; no, not if you was to take and kill me dead this very minute!"

Stronger symptoms of agitation now appearing, Simon thought well to dismiss this incoherent witness, and proceed at once to the stationer's shop in quest of further intelligence. Its proprietor was ready to furnish all the information in his power.

"Had a lady answering their description been in his shop?" "Well, a great many ladies come backwards and forwards, you know. Trade wasn't very brisk just now, but there was always something doing in the fancy stationery line. It was a light business, and most of his customers were females. His 'missis' didn't take much notice, but he happened to be something of a physiognomist himself, and a face never escaped him. A very beautiful young lady, was it? Tall, pale, with dark eyes and hair. Certainly, no doubt, that must be the party. Stepped in about dinner-time; seemed anxious and in a hurry, as you might say; didn't take any order from her, —the young lady only asked as a favour to look into their Court Guide. There it lay, just as she left it. Singular enough, another party had come in afterwards to write a letter, and took the same address, he believed, right at the foot of the column; these were trifles, but it was his way to notice trifles. He was a scientific man, to a certain extent, and in science, as they probably knew, there were no such things as trifles. He remembered a curious story of Sir Isaac Newton. But perhaps the gentlemen were in a hurry."

The gentlemen *were* in a hurry. Dick Stanmore with characteristic impetuosity had plunged at the Court Guide, to scan the page at which it lay open with eager eyes. At the foot of the column, said this man of science. To be sure, there it was, Barsac, Barwise, Barzillai, Bearwarden —the very last name in the page. And yet what could Nina want at Lord Bearwarden's house? Of all places in London why should she go there? Nevertheless, in such a hopeless search, the vaguest hint was welcome, the faintest

clue must be followed out. So the two men, standing in earnest colloquy, under the gas-lamps, resolved to hunt their trail as far as Lord Bearwarden's residence without further delay.

The more precious are the moments, the faster they seem to pass. An autumn day had long given place to night, ere they verified this last piece of intelligence, and acquired some definite aim for their exertions; but neither liked to compare notes with the other, nor express his own disheartening reflection that Nina might be wandering so late, bewildered, lonely, and unprotected, through the labyrinths of the great city.

In the meantime, Gentleman Jim and his confederate were fully occupied with the details necessary to carry their infamous plot into execution. The lawyer had drawn out from the bank all the ready money he could lay hands on, amounting to several hundred pounds. He had furnished Jim with ample funds to facilitate his share of the preparations, and he had still an hour or two on hand before the important moment arrived. That interval he devoted to his private affairs, and those of the office, so that his uncle should be inconvenienced as little as possible by an absence which he now hoped might be prolonged for a considerable time.

It had been dark for more than an hour ere the accomplices met again, equipped and ready for the work they had pledged themselves to undertake.

Jim, indeed, contrary to his wont, when "business," as he called it, was on hand, seemed scarcely sober; but to obtain the use of the vehicle he required without the company of its driver, he had found it necessary to ply the latter with liquor till he became insensible, although the drunken man's instincts of good-fellowship bade him insist that his generous entertainer should partake largely of the fluids consumed at his expense. To drink down a London cabman, on anything like fair terms, is an arduous task, even for a housebreaker, and Jim's passions were roused to their worst by alcohol long before he arrived with his four-wheeled cab at the appointed spot where he was to wait for Tom Ryfe.

How he laughed to himself while he felt the pliant life-

preserver coiled in his great-coat pocket—the long, keen, murderous knife resting against his heart. A fiend had taken possession of the man. Already overleaping the intervening time, ignoring everything but the crime he meditated, his chief difficulty seemed how he should dispose of Tom's mutilated body ere he flew to reap the harvest of his guilt.

He chuckled and grinned with a fierce, savage sense of humour, while he recalled the imperious manner in which Mr. Ryfe had taken the initiative in their joint proceedings; as if they originated in his own invention, were ordered solely for his own convenience; and the tone of authority in which that gentleman had warned him not to be late.

"It's good! That is!" said Jim, sitting on the box of the cab, and peering into the darkness, through which a gas-lamp glimmered with dull, uncertain rays, blurred by the autumn fog. "You'd like to be master, you would, I dare say, all through the job, and for me to be man! You'd best look sharp about it. I'll have that blessed life of yours afore the sun's up to-morrow, and see who'll be master then. Ay, and missis too! Hooray! for the cruel eyes, and the touch-me-not airs. The proud, pale-faced devil! as thought Jim wasn't quite the equals of the dirt beneath her feet. Steady! Here he comes."

And looming through the fog, Mr. Ryfe approached with cautious, resolute step; carrying a revolver in his pocket, prepared to use it, too, on occasion, with the fearless energy of a desperate man.

"Is it all ready, Jim?" said he in a whisper. "You haven't forgot the gag? Nor the shawl to throw round her head? The least mistake upsets a job like this."

For answer, Jim descended heavily from his seat, and holding the cab-door open, pointed to the above-named articles lying folded on the front seat.

"You'll drive, master," said he, with a hoarse chuckle. "You knows the way. First turn to the left. I'll ride inside, like a lord, or a fashionable doctor, and keep my eye on the tackle."

"It's very dark," continued Tom uneasily. "But that's all in our favour, of course. You know her figure as well

as I do. Don't forget, now. I'll drive close to the pavement, and the instant we stop, you must throw the shawl over her head, muffle her up, and whip her in. This beggar can gallop, I suppose."

"He's a thoroughbred 'un," answered Jim, with a sounding pat on the horse's bony ribs. "Leastways, so the chap as I borrowed him off swore solemn. He was so precious drunk, I'm blessed if I think he knowed what he meant. But howsoever, I make no doubt the critter can go when it's pushed."

Thus speaking, Jim helped the other to mount the box, and placed himself inside with the door open, ready to spring like a tiger when he should catch sight of his prey.

The streets of the great city are never so deserted as an hour or two after nightfall, and an hour or two before dawn. Not a single passenger did they meet, and only one policeman; while the cab with its desperate inmates rattled and jolted along on this nefarious enterprise.

It was stopped at last, close to the footway in a dimly-lighted street, within a hundred yards of Lord Bearwarden's house, which stood a few doors off round the corner.

A distant clock struck the hour. That heavy clang seemed to dwell on the gloomy stillness of the atmosphere, and both men felt their nerves strangely jarred by the dull, familiar sound.

Their hearts beat fast. Tom began to wish he had adopted some less unconventional means of attaining his object, and tried in vain to drive from his mind the punishments awarded to such offences as he meditated, by the severity of our criminal code.

Jim had but one feeling, with which heart and brain were saturated. In a few minutes he would see her again! In a new character, possibly—tearful, humbled, supplicating. No; his instincts told him that not even the last extremity of danger would force a tear from those proud eyes, nor bow that haughty head an inch. How this wild, fierce worship maddened him! So longing, yet so slavish—so reckless, so debased, yet all the while cursed with a certain leavening of the true faith, that drove him to

despair. But come what might, in a few minutes he would see her again. Even at such a time, there was something of repose and happiness in the thought.

So the quasi-thoroughbred horse went to sleep and the men waited; waited, wondering how the lagging minutes could pass so slow.

Listen! a light footstep round the corner. The gentle rustle of a woman's dress. A tall, slight figure gliding yonder under the gas-lamp, coming down the street, even now, with head erect, and easy, undulating gait.

The blood rose to Jim's brain till it beat like strokes from a sledge-hammer. Tom shortened the reins, and tightened his grasp round the whip.

Nearer, nearer, she came on. The pure, calm face held high aloft, the pliant figure moving ever with the same smooth, graceful gestures. Fortune favoured them; she stopped when she reached the cab, and seemed about to engage it for her journey.

The men were quick to see their advantage. Jim, coiled for a spring, shrank into the darkest corner of the vehicle. Tom, enacting driver, jumped down, and held the door to help her in.

Catching sight of the dark figure on the front seat, she started back. The next moment, there rose a faint stifled shriek, the shawl was over her head. Jim's powerful arms wound themselves tight round her body, and Tom clambered in haste to the box.

But quick feet had already rained along that fifty yards of pavement. A powerful grasp was at the driver's throat, pulling him back between the wheels of the cab; and he found himself struggling for life with a strong, angry man, who swore desperately, while two more figures ran at speed up the street.

Tom's eyes were starting, his tongue was out.

"Jim, help me!" he managed to articulate. "I'm choking."

"You infernal scoundrel!" exclaimed his antagonist, whose fury seemed redoubled by the sound of that familiar voice: the grasp, closing round Tom's neck like iron, threatened death unless he could get free.

An instinct of self-preservation bade him pluck at his

revolver. He got it out at the moment when Jim, setting his back to the door to secure his captive, dealt with the heavy life-preserver a blow at the assailant's head, which fortunately only reached his shoulder. The latter released Tom's throat to get possession of the pistol. In the struggle it went off. There was a hideous blasphemy, a groan, and a heavy fall between the wheels of the cab.

Ere the smoke cleared away two more auxiliaries appeared on the scene. With Simon Perkins's assistance, Lord Bearwarden had little difficulty in pinioning his late antagonist, while Dick Stanmore, having lifted the imprisoned lady out of the cab, over the housebreaker's prostrate body, held her tightly embraced, in a transport of affection intensified by alarm.

Lord Bearwarden, usually so collected, was now utterly stupefied and amazed. He looked from Tom Ryfe's white face, staring over the badge and great-coat of a London cabman, to the sinking form of his wife—as he believed—in the arms of her lover, clinging to him for protection, responding in utter shamelessness to his caresses and endearments.

"Mr. Stanmore!" he exclaimed, in a voice breathless from exertion, and choking with anger. "You and I have an account to settle that cannot be put off. Lady Bearwarden, I will see you home. Come with me this instant."

Dick seemed as if he thought his lordship had gone mad. Nina stared helplessly at the group. Another gasp and a fainter groan came from the body lying underneath the cab.

"We must look to this man; he is dying," said Simon Perkins, on his knees by the prostrate form, now motionless and insensible.

"My house is round the corner," answered Lord Bearwarden, stooping over the fallen ruffian. "Let us take him in. All the doctors in the world won't save him," he added, in a tone of grave pity. "He's bleeding to death inside."

Nina had been a good deal frightened, but recovered wonderfully in the reassuring presence of her lover. "*His* house?" she asked, in a sufficiently audible voice, con-

sidering her late agitation. "Who is he, Dick, and where does he live?"

Two of the police had now arrived, and were turning their lanterns on the party. The strong white light glared full on Miss Algernon's face and figure, so like Lady Bearwarden's, but yet to the husband's bewildered senses so surely not his wife's.

He shook all over. His face, though flushed a moment ago, turned deadly pale. He clutched Dick's shoulder, and his voice came dry and husky, while he gasped—

"What is it, Stanmore? Speak, man, for the love of heaven. What does it all mean?"

Then came question and answer; clearer, fuller, more fluent with every sentence. And so the explanation went on: how some enemy had roused his worst suspicions; how Lord Bearwarden, deceived by the extraordinary likeness which he could not but acknowledge even now, had been satisfied he saw Dick Stanmore with Maud in a hansom cab; how he had left his home in consequence, and sent that hostile message to Dick, which had so puzzled that gallant, open-hearted gentleman; how a certain letter from Lady Bearwarden, addressed to Mr. Stanmore, and forwarded to her husband, had but confirmed his suspicions; and how, at last, an anonymous communication to the same lady, falling accidentally into his hands, had mystified him completely, and made him resolve to watch and follow her at the hour named, with a desperate hope that something might be revealed to alleviate his sufferings, to give him more certainty of action and future guidance.

"I was horribly cut up, I don't mind confessing it," said Lord Bearwarden, with his kindly grasp still on Dick's shoulder. "And I waited there, outside my own house, like some d——d poaching thief. It seemed so hard I couldn't go in and see her just once more! Presently, out she came, as I thought, and I followed, very craftily, and not too near for fear she should look round. She didn't, though, but walked straight on; and when I saw the cab waiting, and she stopped as if she meant to get in, I couldn't tell what to make of it at all.

"I was only just in time. I came that last few yards

with a rush, I give you my word! And I made a grab at the driver, thinking the best chance was to stop the conveyance at once, or if I couldn't do that, take a free passage with the rest of them. She wasn't going of her own accord, I felt sure. That villain of a lawyer struggled hard. I didn't think he'd been so good a man. I wasn't at all sorry to see you fellows coming up. It was two to one, you know, and I do believe, if it hadn't been for the pistol, they might have got clear off. It shot the worst customer of the two, that poor fellow behind us, right through the body. Under my arm, I should think, for I got a very nasty one on the shoulder just as the smoke flew in my face. It has squared *his* accounts, I fancy. But here we are at my house. Let's get him in, and then you must introduce me properly to this young lady, whose acquaintance I have made in such an unusual manner."

The strange procession had, indeed, arrived at Lord Bearwarden's residence. It consisted of the proprietor himself, whose right arm was now completely disabled, but who gesticulated forcibly with his left; of Dick Stanmore and Nina, listening to his lordship with the utmost deference and attention; of Jim's senseless body, carried by Simon Perkins and one policeman, while Tom Ryfe, in close custody of the other, brought up the rear.

As they entered the hall, Lady Bearwarden's pale, astonished face was seen looking over the banisters. Dorothea, too, creeping down-stairs, with some vague idea of escaping from this friendly refuge, and finding her way back, perhaps, to the cool shining Serpentine, came full upon the group at the moment when Jim was laid tenderly down by his bearers, and the policeman whispered audibly to his comrade that, even if the doctor were in the next street now, he would come too late!

She ran forward with a wild, despairing cry. She flung herself down by the long, limp, helpless figure. She raised the drooping head with its matted locks, its fixed, white, rigid face, and pressed it hard against her bosom—hard to her wayward, ignorant, warped, but loving heart.

"Speak to me, Jim!" she moaned once more, rocking backwards and forwards in her fierce agony. "Speak tc me, deary! You'll never speak again. O! why did they

stop me to-day? It's cruel—cruel! Why did they stop me? We'd have been together before now!"

And the groom of the chambers, an unwilling witness of all these indecorous proceedings, resolved, for that one night, to do his duty stanchly by his employer, but give up his place with inflexible dignity on the morrow.

CHAPTER XXX

UNDER THE ACACIAS

"OUT of drawing; flesh tints infamous; chiaroscuro grossly muddled; no breadth; not much story in it; badly composed; badly treated; badly painted altogether."

So said the reviews, laying down the infallible law of the writer, concerning Simon Perkins's great picture. The public followed the reviews, of course, in accordance with a generous instinct, urging it to believe that he who can write his own language, not, indeed, accurately, but with a certain force and rapidity, must therefore be conversant with all the subjects on which he chooses to declaim. Statesman, chemist, engineer, shipbuilder, soldier, above all, navigator, painter, plasterer, and statuary; like the hungry Greek adventurer of Juvenal, *omnia novit:* like Horace's wise man amongst the Stoics; be the subject boots, beauty, bullocks, or the beer-trade, he is universal instructor and referee.

"Et sutor bonus, et solus formosus, et est rex."

So reviewers abused the picture persistently, and Lord Bearwarden was furious, brandishing a weekly newspaper above his head, and striding about the little Putney lawn with an energy that threatened to immerse him in the river, forgetful of those narrow limits, suggesting the proverbial extent of a fisherman's walk on deck, "two steps and overboard."

His audience, though, were partial and indulgent. The

old ladies in the drawing-room, overhearing an occasional sentence, devoutly believed their nephew was the first painter of his time, Lord Bearwarden the wisest critic that ever lived, the greatest nobleman, the bravest soldier, the kindest husband, always excepting, perhaps, that other husband smoking there under the acacia, interchanging with his lordship many a pleasant jest and smile, that argued the good understanding existing between them.

Dick Stanmore and Lord Bearwarden were now inseparable. Their alliance furnished a standing joke for their wives. "They have the same perverted tastes, my dear, and like the same sort of people," lighthearted Nina would observe to the sister whom she had not found till the close of her girlish life. "It's always fast friends, or, at least, men with a strong tendency to friendship, who are in love with the same woman, and I don't believe they hate each other half as much as we should, even for *that!*"

To which Maud would make no reply, gazing with her dark eyes out upon the river, and wondering whether Dick had ever told the wife he loved how fondly he once worshipped another face so like her own.

For my part, I don't think he had. I don't think he could realise the force of those past feelings, nor comprehend that he could ever have cared much for any one but the darling who now made the joy of his whole life. When first he fell in love with Nina, it was for her likeness to her sister. Now, though in his eyes the likeness was fading every day, that sister's face was chiefly dear to him because of its resemblance to his wife's.

Never was there a happier family party than these persons constituted. Lord and Lady Bearwarden, Mr. and Mrs. Stanmore, drove down from London many days in the week to the pretty Putney villa. Simon was truly rejoiced to see them, while the old ladies vibrated all over, caps, fronts, ribbons, lockets, and laces, with excitement and delight. The very flowers had a sweeter perfume, the laburnums a richer gold, the river a softer ripple, than in the experience of all previous springs.

"They may say what they like," continued Lord Bearwarden, still with the weekly paper in his hand. "I main-

tain the criterion of merit is success. I maintain that the Rhymer and the Fairy Queen is an extraordinary picture, and the general public the best judge. Why there was no getting near it at the Academy. The people crowded round as they do about a Cheap Jack at a fair. I'm not a little fellow, but I couldn't catch a glimpse of any part except the Fairy Queen's head. I think it's *the* most beautiful face I ever saw in my life!"

"Thank you, Lord Bearwarden," said Nina, laughing. "He'd such a subject, you know; it's no wonder he made a good picture of it."

No wonder, indeed! Did she ever think his brush was dipped in colours ground on the poor artist's heart?

"It's very like *you* and it's very like Maud," answered Lord Bearwarden. "Somehow you don't seem to me so like each other as you used to be. And yet how puzzled I was the second time I ever set eyes on you!"

"How cross you were! and how you scolded!" answered saucy Mrs. Stanmore. "I wouldn't have stood it from Dick. Do you ever speak to Maud like that?"

The look that passed between Lord and Lady Bearwarden was a sufficient reply. The crowning beauty had come to those dark eyes of hers, now that their pride was centred in another, their lustre deepened and softened with the light of love.

"It was lucky for you, dear, that he *was* angry," said her ladyship. "If he had hesitated a moment, it's frightful to think what would have become of you, at the mercy of those reckless, desperate men!"

"They were punished, at any rate," observed Nina gravely. "I shall never forget that dead fixed face in the hall. Nor the other man's look, the cowardly one, while he prayed to be forgiven. Forgiven, indeed! One ought to forgive a great deal, but not such an enormity as that!"

"I think he got off very cheap," interposed Dick Stanmore. "He deserved to be hanged, in my opinion, and they only transported him—not even for life!"

"Think of the temptation, Dick," replied Nina, with another saucy smile. "How would you like it yourself?

And you were in pursuit of the same object. You can't deny that, only he hit upon me first."

"I was more sorry for the other villain," said Lord Bearwarden, who had heard long ago the history of Gentleman Jim's persecution of her ladyship. "He was a daring, reckless scoundrel, and I should like to have killed him myself, but it *did* seem hard lines to be shot by his own confederate in the row!"

"I pity that poor woman most of all," observed Lady Bearwarden, with a sigh. "It is quite a mercy that she should have lost her senses. She suffered so dreadfully till her mind failed."

"How is she?" "Have you seen her?" came from the others in a breath.

"I was with her this morning," answered Maud. "She didn't know me. I don't think she knows anybody. They can't get her to read, nor do needlework, nor even walk out into the garden. She's never still, poor thing! but paces up and down the room mumbling over a bent half-crown and a knot of ribbon," added Lady Bearwarden, with a meaning glance at her husband, "that they found on the dead man's body, and keeps pressing it against her breast while she mutters something about their wanting to take it away. It's a sad, sad sight! I can't get that wild vacant stare out of my head. It's the same expression that frightened me so on her face that day by the Serpentine. It has haunted me ever since. She seemed to be looking miles away across the water at something I couldn't see. I wonder what it was. I wonder what she looks at now!"

"She's never been in her right senses, has she, since that dreadful night?" asked Nina. "If she were a lady, and well dressed, and respectable, one would say it's quite a romance. Don't you think perhaps, after all, it's more touching as it is?" and Nina, who liked to make little heartless speeches she did not mean, looked lovingly on Dick, with her dark eyes full of tears, as she wondered what would become of her if anything happened to *him!*

"I can scarcely bear to think of it," answered Maud, laying her hand on her husband's shoulder. "Through all

the happiness of that night—far, far the happiest of my whole life—this poor thing's utter misery comes back to me like a warning and a reproach. If I live to a hundred I shall never forget her when she looked up to heaven from the long rigid figure with its fixed white face, and tried to pray, and couldn't, and didn't know how! O! my darling!"—and here Maud's voice sank to a whisper, while the haughty head drooped lovingly and humbly towards her husband's arm,—"what have I done that I should be so blessed, while there is all this misery and disappointment and despair in the world?"

He made no attempt at explanation. The philosophy of our Household Cavalry, like the religion of Napoleon's "Old Guard," is adapted for action rather than casuistry. He did not tell her that in the journey of life for some the path is made smooth and easy, for others paved with flint and choked with thorns; but that a wise Director knows best the capabilities of the wayfarer, and the amount of toil required to fit him for his rest. So up and down, through rough and smooth, in storm and sunshine—all these devious tracks lead home at last. If Lord Bearwarden thought this, he could not put it into words, but his arm stole lovingly round the slender waist, and over his brave, manly face came a gentle look that seemed to say he asked no better than to lighten every load for that dear one through life, and bear her tenderly with him on the road to heaven.

"*C'est l'amour!*" laughed Nina, "that makes all the bother and complications of our artificial state of existence!"

"And all its sorrows!" said Lord Bearwarden.

"And all its sin!" said her ladyship.

"And all its beauty!" said Dick.

"And all its happiness!" added the painter, who had not yet spoken, from his seat under the acacia that grew by the water's edge.

"Well put!" exclaimed the others, "and you need not go out of this dear little garden in search of the proof."

But Simon made no answer. Once more he was looking wistfully on the river, thinking how it freshened and fertilised all about it as it passed by. Fulfilling its noble

task—bearing riches, comforts, health, happiness, yet taking to deck its own bosom, not one of the humblest wild-flowers that must droop and die but for its love. Consoler, sympathiser, benefactor, night and day. Gently, noiselessly, imperceptibly speeding its good work, making no pause, knowing no rest, till far away beyond that dim horizon, under the golden heaven, it merged into the sea.

THE END

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